



ALLEN
ROY EVANS

*All
In A
Twilight*

DOUBLEDAY
DORAN



PS
8509
V2
8
1944

HSS

Ex libris
UNIVERSITATIS
ALBERTAENSIS



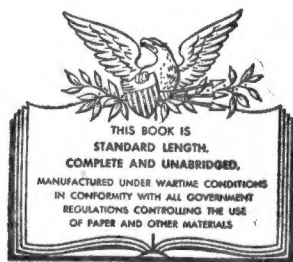
BERTRAND SMITH
"ACRES OF BOOK"
140, PACIFIC AVENUE
LONG BEACH 2
CALIFORNIA

THIS is the poignant story of Canadian pioneers as told through the experiences of a prairie farmer and his wife. Emma and Burl Zither settle in a wooden farmhouse to force their living from a land covered with buffalo grass and whitened buffalo bones. The first half of the book is Emma's story. She was a gentle schoolteacher who never dreamed she would have to face the elemental fury of this frontier life. Blizzards, scorching heat, and dust storms are hardships which force her to grow in spiritual strength and vigor. Her life of sacrifice is tempered only by the moments of affection she shares with her husband and two sons.

When Burl comes to tell his part, we see that he was a man who had ruthlessly dedicated himself to the soil. In contrast to Emma, he had never thought of this life as a sacrifice nor cared about getting away. His was the spirit that helped make Central Canada one of the richest farmlands in North America.

The author, Allen Roy Evans, who comes of the same sturdy pioneer stock of which he writes, has woven these two stories into a novel reflecting the elemental nature of his prairie homeland. Evans is already well known in Canada as the author of successful novels and fine native poetry.

This has been serialized in a Canadian paper.



All In A Twilight

ALLEN ROY EVANS

All In A Twilight



DOUBLEDAY, DORAN & CO., INC.

Garden City, New York

1944

COPYRIGHT, 1940, 1942, 1944

BY ALLEN ROY EVANS

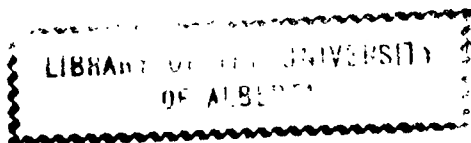
ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES

AT

THE COUNTRY LIFE PRESS, GARDEN CITY, N. Y.

FIRST EDITION



To the memory of my Father and Mother
members of that grand company of Prairie Pioneers.
Now they rest through zero mornings
and August noondays.

810900,

*A common greyness silvers everything –
All in a twilight, you and I alike
– You at the point of your first pride in me
That's gone you know.*

Andrea del Sarto, ROBERT BROWNING

Part I

EMMA

I

AS THE TRAIN ROLLED ON from the last divisional point Emma Anderson's thoughts reached almost a state of panic. Tomorrow, in fact late this afternoon, she would be Emma Anderson no longer, but Mrs. Burl Zither! It was terrifying. Marriage was a doubtful venture at any time, but when the man was almost a stranger—that was the part that made it terrifying.

Of course he was not really a stranger, but he had been away for three years, and even before that she had known him very little. Emma remembered that he was big and rather silent. It was hard, even when she closed her eyes, to create a mental picture of him.

But he would know her because she was the only woman left on the train. She would get off and wait for a big strange man to step up and speak to her. A hasty marriage ceremony in the little prairie village and then a long drive away off somewhere, wherever this man had found his homestead. What would happen to her once she was in the power of this giant?

No! No! She must not think of him like that! He was Burl Zither, a nice reliable young man, the only son of Jane and Andrew Zither, to whose big farmhouse she had often gone after her schoolteaching was done for the day. Burl's rare letters to her were always addressed to his mother, because he felt the curiosity of the postmaster's wife would be too great to resist opening a letter to the village teacher.

But at last he had written that he now really owned his land—it did not belong to the government any more. He had a small

house ready and he would meet the train on the fourth of October. That was today.

Emma gazed at the passing fields. At least there were a few fields, with faraway dots which must be farm buildings. But for the most part the country was grass, a sea of tall yellow grass that stretched endlessly under a sun, also yellow with the haze of Indian summer. Someday all this lonely prairie would be filled with settlers and big farm buildings like the country back East.

Even where Burl's father and mother lived was prairie land, but it had been settled and tamed for years. They had expected Burl would stay on the old farm or at least near by. But he had been restless and ambitious, anxious to do for himself. He struck on into the West even as his father had gone a generation before. Was there no limit to this appalling West whose boundaries stretched on and on endlessly into the setting sun?

Coming out to teach had been an adventure into the West. And now there was another farther West. Emma remembered how the postmaster's wife had eyed her the first time, asking in her raspy voice: "Well, I s'pose you're another come to git your man!" In her embarrassment she had been unable to answer, especially after having just been told that all the teachers preceding her had married young farmers. Back home, in the faraway East, the towns had seemed crowded with girls because so many of their brothers were trekking westward. It was a perpetual joke that when a girl did the same thing she was going out to that romantic land where men were men and she was undoubtedly after one of them.

But there had been no such thought in Emma's mind. She had approached the great business of teaching seriously as a life profession. She had accepted the first school that offered. What if it was a village school? She would gain experience and in a year or two try for a large town school and eventually work her way to a city. But now she was going out into an even farther West to marry a farmer forever and ever!

The train moved on across the lonely flatlands, taking on a sack of mail and dropping off another at the raw little prairie

towns. A gaunt red elevator, perhaps two, a row of false-front frame buildings, shacks really, a station, sometimes a water tank, and the next town would be just like the last one. And so would the next and the next!

Near one of these drab little huddles will be my home, Emma thought wonderingly. My home, perhaps for all the rest of my life. Of course the place might grow. The inhabitants of each town cherished a fierce loyalty, an unswerving belief that their particular handful of buildings was an embryo city. Emma had discovered that unquenchable hope was a characteristic of prairie people. Someone had called the prairie the land of next year, because the thought of the people seemed to be concentrated on how wonderful things were going to be the next year. And the next.

She, too, must think that way, Emma decided. It was the way of hope. Some overpowering impulse had swept her into the life, and now, with all her strength, she must make the best of it. Perhaps their town would grow. Some of the towns were sure to become large. There would be concerts and music, churches and choirs, and the things that made life civilized. She wondered how much Burl cared about things like that. There had been so little time to know him.

He must go to church, because she remembered their first meeting had been in a church. One of those affairs the people called a basket social; the girls and younger women packed baskets of food for two and the men bid on the baskets, just like an auction sale. Sometimes the bidders knew the baskets; sometimes they bid blindly, just for the fun of the surprise. If the young men recognized the basket of some popular girl, they ran the bid up to a fantastic sum—two or three dollars perhaps.

Emma remembered how she had put the sandwiches and cake into her basket with indifference, only because Mrs. Stevens, where she boarded, had urged her. No doubt Mrs. Stevens had let it be known that the teacher's basket was red, covered with a blue cloth. The men began a spirited bidding, higher and higher, until she became embarrassed. Ted Williams, the only

son of the well-to-do Williams' Flour & Feed Store, bid four-fifty. Then a big determined voice shouted the unprecedented sum of five dollars. It was the end—no one would top such a bid.

When the man possessed his basket he came straight over to her. Emma remembered that he had not needed to look for the name on the tag.

"I'm Burl Zither," he announced in a voice that matched his size. "You're the new teacher out here."

"Yes, I'm the teacher," she admitted in a small voice. He was so dominating that if he had told her she was a new prize sheep, she would probably have agreed.

While the remaining baskets were being bid in at forty and fifty cents, they found a small table. Emma remembered how she regretted not taking more care with her basket; but how could she have known it would sell for such a spectacular price?

As they ate, self-consciously Burl explained a little about himself. He was an only child. He still worked on his father's prosperous farm two miles out on the South Road. His parents were disappointed because he would not stay on the old farm.

"Why not?" Emma had not yet understood the westward urging.

"It's hard to explain, ma'am," Burl said earnestly. "But it seems like I've got to go West. I want new land; land that nobody's ever touched. I want to build up a place right from the grass roots."

"And you couldn't do that building up where you are?"

"Not in the same way, ma'am." Burl was undoubtedly trying to make her see it his way. "I can't rightly put it in words. It's more like a feeling; you have it or you don't. I guess it's like birds feel when they grow too big for their nest. Something just makes 'em get out."

He talked on about taking his share in the building of a new part of the country. He made it seem like a duty and at the same time an adventure. His dreams had been something to think about.

Burl arranged for another meeting so that they could con-

tinue the talk. It had seemed natural and not especially significant that she should see him again. She told herself that if she hoped to make a success of her teaching, she must become acquainted with the people, their point of view, ambitions, and dreams.

She remembered how he had made the idea of going farther West almost a personal matter—a kind of test. It was all right for those who were not very strong to stay and carry on in a settled district. Those who were not sure of themselves, who were not sure of their resourcefulness and endurance, should not try. Burl divided people into two classes, those who had the great pioneering spirit and those who had not.

As he talked of the new West he began to say “we,” as if he already included her in his coming adventure. He was so earnest about it that she had not the heart to contradict him. She let him talk and plan, and imperceptibly she was drawn in, adding an idea and a suggestion to his enthusiasm. Looking back, it was not easy to discover at just what point she had become involved. It was like going into a stream and finding after a time that the stream had a current and that there could be no getting out of its sweep.

How could she tell a man she could not marry him when he had not asked her? He asked questions such as what color paint did she like for a house. How about white Leghorns or Plymouth Rocks? Should a house face sunrise or sunset? Who could refuse answering such questions? And yet continued answers could give but one implication. There seemed no point at which she could give a decided “no,” because Burl had not made a definite issue of marriage. Almost from the beginning he had taken her attitude as consent, and she had not been courageous enough to tell him otherwise.

Yes, Emma admitted to herself, she had really drifted into marriage. Sometimes she was happy about it as something of Burl's enthusiasm for the pioneer West stirred her. It would be splendid building up a life together in a new clean country where everyone started on an equal footing.

Then doubts assailed her. She was not big and robust, the

"hearty" type, like so many of the young farm wives. Perhaps she could not carry out her part on a new farm. Her mother had been a music teacher and her father ran a small-town paper. One grandfather was a country doctor and the other a kind of preacher, or "circuit rider," as her mother called him. None of her people were of the adventurous pioneer type. When she married Burl it would be like stepping into a strange life that none of her immediate ancestors had tried.

She must carry her share. She must make Burl proud of her ability. She resolved, almost fiercely, that he would never find her slacking. No, not in anything! She did not quite know what this "anything" might involve, but she would go through with it. She remembered vaguely hearing her mother talk of a "wife's duties." Whatever might be included in this unknown term, she would not shrink back now.

It would have been more comforting if she had known Burl better. During his period of homesteading he had not been able to come back. Then when the title from the government had come to him, and he knew beyond a doubt that the land was his, he had sent for her. In an hour or two she would be his too. No longer an independent teacher telling children what to do, but a wife, probably being told in her turn what to do. Maybe liking it, and maybe not!

In her absorption with this thought she did not hear the conductor call out. She did not notice that the train had almost stopped until the conductor touched her: "Your station, ma'am."

2

FROM THE BACK PLATFORM of the car she watched the station platform slide into view. Several children and two old men gazed absently at the train. A man waited with a mail sack on his back and another man trundled a truck over the planks. Then

out of nowhere a big man appeared, and instantly she knew it was Burl.

They both said, "How are you?" at the same instant, and they shook hands under the curious gaze of the platform loafers.

"We can go straightaway to the parson," Burl said in his practical way. "Then I'll pack your stuff in the wagon."

Emma nodded. She was afraid if she spoke Burl might notice the tremor in her voice. She felt herself trotting beside him on the wooden sidewalk as he pointed out the buildings:

"That's the store and the post office; the next is the barber-shop. There's the new hotel. Over here's the livery stable, and there's the drugstore next the blacksmith shop. Beyond the lumber yard you see the church, and back of that the school. Not a thing here two years ago. Can you imagine that! Not a thing but grass and buffalo tracks, and now look!" He waved at the few buildings with an almost personal pride. "This is a great country and it's jumping right ahead."

He talked on, and Emma was grateful that he did not ask her how she felt and if she was glad she had come. Perhaps he noticed her confusion and talked to cover the embarrassing moment. Perhaps he was not altogether at ease himself, although it was hard to think of Burl Zither as embarrassed.

"Here we are!" They turned down a narrow path. "The chap's name is Ormond Snaith—Reverend, I guess, but he's just a boy." Burl knocked and the young preacher opened the door.

"Ah, Mr. Burl—Mr. Zither, I mean! Come in, both of you. I've been expecting you." The young man stood uncertainly until Burl said:

"Well, we're ready, if you are."

"Oh, of course! Of course!" He fumbled with a black-covered book. "I must confess this is really my first wedding."

"Well, it's my first too," Burl said brusquely. "Sure you know how?"

"Oh, I think so!" The preacher managed a sickly smile.

"We don't want it bungled," Burl warned him. "Where's your witnesses?"

"Oh, I must have forgotten. I—I don't know many people here yet," the awkward boy explained.

"You don't have to know anybody." Burl opened the door and shouted: "Hi, you! Hi!" A man on the street turned uncertainly. Burl shouted again: "Bring in the chap that's comin' down the street there."

When the two came in Burl asked: "Can you chaps write your names?"

"Sure we can," one answered indignantly. "What's goin' on here?"

"All you got to do is listen five minutes and then sign that you heard it." Burl put a half dollar in the hand of each.

"Huh, a weddin'!" The men smiled and slumped into chairs.

The preacher at last found the page and began to read the service.

As Emma listened to the familiar words she thought of weddings in her old home town. A church gay with flowers and ribbons, a solemn old minister, a procession of frilly girls, music that made you feel sad and happy at the same time—all these things she had imagined vaguely for herself in some undefined future. Now a strange preacher was stumbling over the ceremony in a two-room shack. Strange witnesses waited to get away. Even the bridegroom seemed strange. Perhaps all this was some fantastic dream and she would waken in the morning to go to her classes as usual.

But she heard herself whispering the responses. She was conscious of signing her name. The young preacher shook hands, and again she was out on the street with Burl. Then she felt herself riding along on the seat beside him, and she knew that all her few possessions had been dumped in the wagon box behind.

With their peculiar swinging gait the oxen moved out of the town. They began following a faint trail across the prairies. In the windless haze of late afternoon Emma felt threads of gossamer float across her face. Only the creak of the wagon and the faint click, click as the oxen touched the tips of their long horns broke the quietness. On the right the big red sun dropped

behind the flat prairie rim. Emma watched it sink to half a ball, then almost at once only a narrow slit of gold was left. It was all gone except the flare of light that was left behind for a long time.

There was a sudden chill in the air, and Burl stretched his arm into the wagon behind until he fished up a blanket. He wrapped it around her shoulders and folded it carefully across her knees.

"There's no heat left once the sun's gone," he explained as he tucked in the edges. "I hoped this Indian summer'd hold out till you got here. We had snow two weeks ago—heavy. But we always get this last spell of good weather. Gives us time to straighten up a few last things we forgot to get done."

Emma was grateful that he talked on as if he did not notice her silence. Perhaps he did notice and understood a little of how she felt. How did it happen that she, Emma Anderson, the careful little schoolteacher, should be out in a raw country, jolting through the darkness with an almost unknown man? She felt herself swaying with the sway of the oxen. Whenever the wheels bumped over a badger hole she lurched against Burl. She was warm on the side next to him.

The stars came out, sharp and brittle, and Emma knew there would be a light frost. The vast, lonely land began to take hold of her. She thought of the first covered-wagon families who had moved across the plains a long time ago. She remembered the stories of their sufferings, their battles with Indians, and their marvelous courage as they traveled on with the light of the West in their eyes. If they could do all that, then she could do the little that might be her share in the building of a new country. Somehow she felt strangely comforted. She felt herself part of that great invisible army of pioneers who had passed this way before. Perhaps something of their heroic spirit still lingered over the land. She became conscious of Burl saying:

"That light winking away off there is on the Beeman place. This one to the left is Heck Phinney's. He's just married. Wife's name is Sarah."

"And where's your—our light, Burl?"

"Well, naturally we haven't one. There's nobody home. But we're most there now."

Then the wagon stopped and Burl sprang out. "Here we are!" He lifted her down. It was just like halting on the flat prairie. There was nothing to see that made this spot different from any other. But Burl and the oxen must be able to see in the dark. He went off somewhere, and in a moment a small square of light sprang out of the night.

When they came to the door he carried her in. "Old custom or something," he laughed. "This is the kitchen, dining room, pantry, woodshed, and servants' quarters." He waved his arm to include the one small room. He pointed to a door. "Over there is the entrance to the parlor, bedroom, sitting room, and library. It's just the same size as this."

"Why, Burl, I think it's fine!" She was appalled at the smallness of it, but he was so proud of everything that she made herself say it.

"It's not fine," he said soberly, "but it's ours."

Ah, that was what made him so proud! Not the thing itself, but the feeling of ownership.

Burl touched a match to the kindling he had ready in the stove. "I'll be right back soon's I put away the oxen."

Emma looked about at the rough board walls, the shelves without curtains, the bare table, the wooden benches. She did not know what she had expected, but it had not been this. The place was so unbelievably small! For a moment the walls seemed to close in and smother her. Instinctively she opened the door.

Why, of course people lived in places like this, much smaller than this, she assured herself. Didn't new settlers live in wagons and tents and sod houses? Anywhere until they got a start.

She advanced into the room and opened the inner door. In the shadows she saw the outline of a blanket-covered bed. She drew back suddenly and closed the door. She felt guilty, as if she had been caught peeking into a private place. No, she must not go in there.

Then all at once came the overwhelming conviction that she must go in. Why, of course she must! Where else in this doll-sized place could she go? Where else could Burl go? She sat down suddenly on one of the benches against the wall. Then Burl came in.

"Getting thawed out?" He stuffed small brush into the stove. "It's like summer in the daytime, but it's sharp at night." He filled a kettle from the water pail. "I know this is all sort of rough and raw to you, but just get the idea like we're camping for a time. Every year things get better and better in a new country."

"It's all right, Burl," Emma said in a small voice. "I can camp. I can do anything we need to do."

"You're home now," Burl reminded her. "We don't have to go on anywhere from here."

"No, of course not." Emma took off her hat and put it on the bench beside her. It was almost impossible to shake off the feeling that she would soon be leaving. She could not be expected to stay here all alone with this strange man. Not just because a boy preacher had mumbled a few words. Then into the confusion of her thoughts came Burl's words:

"Maybe you'd like to pour tea in your own house, Mrs. Zither?"

"Oh, oh, of course I would!" She took off her black cotton gloves and put them on her hat. It helped a good deal to have something to do.

Burl cut into pieces a hard, flat sort of loaf which he said the settlers called "bannocks." It was the only kind of bread men knew how to make.

When Emma thought of the crude benches and table, the unpalatable bread and tea, all the limitations of life she had unaccountably undertaken, a wave of self-pity overwhelmed her. She struggled to keep back a flood of tears.

"Tell me," she urged Burl, "tell me how it'll be later, next year, the year after."

He looked at her curiously. Then he seemed to understand.

"Of course for you," he said quickly, "the greatest difference will be the house—the new house. It doesn't take long—some good yields and prices. We could have a better place very soon. Or we could wait a little longer and have a really big house. I'd like you to have the finest in the country. And while we work and wait we'll have all the fun of planning it. Big rooms downstairs, and upstairs a lot of rooms—a sitting room for you and a room for the boys and a place——"

"The boys?" Emma questioned.

"Why—why, yes," Burl stumbled. "I guess I just said that, just kind of rambling on, like. You know how the future gets hold of a man."

Then suddenly his meaning dawned on Emma. By boys he meant sons, his sons and hers. To all this hard life must be added motherhood. She had thought of this only as some vague, far-off possibility. And now this man that she hardly knew had put it into words. He was planning for it! Fear and rebellion swept over her.

No doubt she showed her feelings. Burl seemed to understand. Suddenly he began to tell her about the scattered neighbors, who they were, where they were from, and what they were like. He talked on as long as he could think of anything to say. At last he stood up.

"I'm going to look at the oxen. I always take a peek at 'em the last thing at night."

He began to light the lantern. Then he noticed the moon was up and he went out without a light.

Now what? Emma sat in an agony of indecision. They could not stay on the hard benches talking all night. She took off her coat and folded it carefully. Again she opened the bedroom door and again she drew back. Burl had said nothing about this room except to joke about its smallness. Why hadn't he? She fixed herself on the bench again, pulling her knees up to her chin and leaning against the wall. She could stay here all night; in fact she preferred to stay here.

Then Burl came in suddenly and Emma sat up in alarm. He

looked at her a long time before he said anything. Then he spoke almost like thinking aloud:

"I'm sorry, but there's an ox doesn't seem just right. I'll have to stay with it all night, like as not." He took a bottle from the shelf. "You make yourself at home." He opened the bedroom door. "Just put your things anywhere. I'll put up a lot of nails for you tomorrow." He moved out into the night.

Emma breathed again. She pulled off the top of her big telescope valise and shook out her clothes. She must free herself of the feeling that she was about to go on from here. No, this was her place. However hard to admit, this was home for a long time, perhaps for all time. She took off her shoes and stepped out of her dress. She could not bring herself to do more. Not just yet, not until the place seemed a little less strange.

She curled up on the bed, pulling a blanket over her. Now if she could only doze off, even for a short time! But there was a tension, an expectancy from which she could not relax. She knew she was listening every moment for the opening of the door.

For a long time she rested, but sleep would not come. Perhaps Burl was having a hard time. He might need help. Hot water or something. After all, she reminded herself, the oxen were vital to her too.

She dressed and stepped out into the silent night. The moon was high now, and the land lay under its spell. A touch of frost sparkled from the ground. To the right was a low huddle of sod. It must be the stable, because nothing else could be.

Emma hurried over the crisp earth. She pushed on the door set deep in the thick sod wall. The door swung, letting in a shaft of light. The oxen lay side by side. They turned their heads with slow curiosity, then looked away again. Emma heard Burl's undisturbed breathing, and in a moment her eyes found him half buried in a pile of hay. Beside him on the earth floor of the stable was the bottle, still unopened. Slowly she pulled the door shut and slowly she moved back across the yard.

Quickly the knowledge came to her. Burl had invented the

story of the sick ox to spare her feelings. He understood her fear and confusion because of the strangeness of everything, himself included. He wanted to give her time to know him. He was a good man—a wonderfully good man. All at once he did not seem like a big stranger. He was Burl Zither, her husband. He was the man who wanted her to share with him all the rest of his life. Nothing he could ever do would be any finer than the thing he had done tonight. Emma burrowed under the covers and was instantly asleep.

3

SHE HEARD the dropping of a stove lid and Burl muttering at his own clumsiness. Pale sunlight came through the one little window. Why, it was morning! Emma wriggled into her clothes and hurried out. Burl sat beside the stove. He put down his cup of tea when he heard her. Without premeditation she found herself kissing him, her arms about his neck. When she drew back he swung her on his knees.

They sat thus, looking at each other with a new understanding. Both her hands were lost in his massive clasp.

"How's the sick ox?" she whispered. She must not let him know his subterfuge was discovered.

"Sick ox?" he fumbled. "Oh, that! He's all right. He's fine." He took the bottle from his pocket and placed it on the table. "Mighty powerful stuff."

Emma saw that it was still unopened.

An appalling cry, a kind of coyotelike wail, sounded at the door. They sprang to their feet. Then Burl grinned. "It's that scoundrel, Heck Phinney. He always does that." Burl rushed to the door, and Emma expected a battle to follow. But the men were shaking hands, although they still called each other hor-

rible names. It seemed that the worse names they could think of, the more they thought of each other. Before she reached the door Emma heard "horse thief," "cradle snatcher," "coyote in sheep's clothing," and other choice epithets.

"Here's the better half," Burl said when Emma stood in the doorway.

"A lot better'n half, I'd say," Heck cackled in his high voice. "Howdy, ma'am. Hope you'll like our country."

"I like it already," Emma smiled.

"You must come over soon, ma'am." Heck always talked as if perpetually embarrassed. "I got a critter with me now."

"Heck means he has a wife," Burl explained. "I don't see how he fooled any woman into living with him, but he did."

"Well, I'll git back." Heck wiped his big hand over his face as he grinned at Burl. "And don't forget you got work to do. But I couldn't blame you if you did." He strode away with his peculiar hippity-hop gait.

"That was a compliment for you," Burl smiled. "It was pretty good for Heck. He hasn't talked that much in a long time."

Emma was dismayed by the rough appearance and the abrupt talk of their nearest neighbor. No doubt the few others were something like Heck. These people were to be her friends for years and years. Not musicians and artists, teachers and writers—those she had in a general way thought of as "cultured"—they were not to form her circle of friends, as she had always dreamed. But her way was now destined to be among these lanky prairie people whose talk she could scarcely understand. These men and their wives were the people, the only ones, she would see for months, for years on end.

Perhaps Burl understood her feelings partly. He said: "Don't judge Heck by what he said just now. He's a bashful cuss when he first meets anyone. He just talks like that to kind of cover up, if you know what I mean. If you got in trouble he'd give you the pants off his—I mean he'd do anything."

"I'll like everybody," Emma promised. "When I know their talk and everything."

"Sure you will!" Burl encouraged. "And they'll like you. We'll get on. Now, how'd you like to see your farm, Mrs. Zither?"

She grabbed up a coat and followed Burl, who was almost bursting with pride, although he pretended to be offhand. He pointed out the corner stake on the little mound, and how far the land stretched to the west and the same distance to the north. There were two small stubble fields, half plowed. All the rest was tall yellow grass and buffalo bushes.

"It's tough plowing the first time," Burl explained. "The sod's so thick it's terrible. But once it gets mellowed the land's wonderful. Oxen are mighty slow, but they're so strong it's about the only way to get the sod turned over."

Along the side next the road stood a row of straight trees the size of whip handles. "Maples," Burl said as he touched one proudly. "I got 'em down along the river flats. They're not much to look at, but by the time the boys get—" He stopped suddenly, as he had the night before. "I reckon trees are kinda nice to have around," he finished quickly.

They looked in the sod stable where the oxen chewed slowly, no doubt hoping for a day of rest.

"That's all we've got," Burl said. "Not much yet, but you'll be surprised what even a year or two can do. A big crop and good prices, and we'll start to build. The big barn about over there by those bushes, with sheds behind." He talked on, trying to show her the picture in his mind, not the bald prairie which met the eye.

The sun grew in strength and the frost left the grass. A few belated lines of geese drifted overhead; they were not deceived by the last days of Indian summer. Emma watched until they faded into the haze.

"You'd like to go with 'em," Burl said. "I guess everybody feels like that when they see geese."

"They're so kind of free," Emma sighed wistfully.

"They have worries." Burl laughed at her eagerness. "They

got food to find and trouble all the time keeping from getting shot."

"Maybe it's better not to know about them too much." She still gazed into the south where the birds had disappeared.

"We'll follow 'em," Burl promised suddenly. "In a few years, when we get things all set here, we'll go after the geese. Spend a winter in the South or someplace. You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

"It would be grand," Emma murmured. "And I want to help, Burl. I want to do everything a woman can do." She seized his arm in her eagerness.

On this high note they went in to their forgotten breakfast.

4

THE GOLDEN DAYS faded into the slate-gray days of winter. The ground stiffened and the first flakes floated sadly down over a silent earth. The prairies rested.

In spite of the rosier future that Emma could imagine, the winter was not easy. There were days of loneliness when homesickness overwhelmed her and the monotony of the same small shack, the same uninteresting tasks over and over again were almost beyond bearing. When the deep snow came the oxen were so slow and awkward that it was easier to stay home than to make the prodigious effort of going anywhere.

When a spell of clear weather seemed likely, Burl and Heck went off to the distant river flats for wood. Although they made it safer for themselves by going together, Emma lived in dread of the sudden blizzards which swept across the plains, almost without warning. Burl laughed and claimed he could predict the weather. He pointed out the strange phenomena of sundogs and rings around the moon. He talked learnedly about these sky

portents, but Emma knew he did it largely to quiet her fears.

The monotony of diet was varied by the rabbits and prairie chickens the men brought back along with their loads of brushwood. Heck had an old-fashioned gun, but sometimes the snow was so deep and the cold so intense that all life seemed to have vanished, even from the shelter of the river flats.

Emma remembered the first time Burl had brought in a little white rabbit. It was frozen stiff as he tossed it on the bench.

"A prairie lifesaver! When it's fried right you can't tell it from chicken." Then he had gone out to unload his wood.

When he came in again the animal was still on the bench. "Don't you like it?" He looked at Emma in surprise.

"I don't know," she confessed. "I never tried." It came to her suddenly that he had expected her to have the rabbit ready.

In a moment he understood. He seized the animal and with a jerk or two of his big hands he skinned it. He seemed to make a few slashes with the big knife and the rabbit was in pieces ready for the pan.

In spite of all her efforts Emma could not eat any of the rabbit. She went through a pretense so that Burl might not notice. But he did.

"Say, you're not eating a thing!"

"I'm all right." She tried to smile. "Maybe I'm not very hungry, that's all."

"Sure you're hungry! You don't like this prairie rabbit, that's what."

"Maybe that's it," she had to confess. "I guess if I hadn't seen it first—if I didn't keep thinking of it as a rabbit—if I hadn't watched you—" Suddenly her voice broke and she hid her face on the table.

"Aw, don't worry about it!" Burl patted her arm. "I guess it seems queer to eat anything the first time. I remember now Heck said his wife was the same way. She thought it was a cat he brought in." Burl's laugh boomed out, and Emma was able to lift her face and give him a watery smile.

Emma worried over her deficiencies as a farm wife. Burl was

such a tremendous worker and he had such wonderful plans that he must surely feel how his wife lagged behind. When he brought in two prairie chickens she did not tell him she knew nothing about getting them ready. An hour later she was still picking at the first one.

"They're such little things it takes too long that way." With a quick rip he skinned them as he had the rabbit. Patiently he showed her how to clean them and separate the pieces at the joints. She made herself watch the operation, but she was not happy about it. She kept reminding herself that in a new country people must learn to do everything for themselves.

On a clear day they made a visit to the Beeman homestead. Sam Beeman and his wife Lizzie were almost pathetically eager to welcome the rare visitors. Several times Emma stayed with Sarah Phinney while Burl and Heck went after their wood. Other farmsteads were at too great a distance for neighborly calls.

When the subject of church was mentioned to Burl he said: "Next year, maybe, we'll have a horse and maybe we'll have a preacher. That boy preacher couldn't tell us anything. I've talked to Israel Bower about that. He's the postmaster, and he wrote off East somewhere to ask for an older man."

To make Sundays different from other days, Emma read in her Bible. Once Emma asked Burl if she might read to him. He agreed, but it seemed to bring a feeling of embarrassment between them, and she made no second attempt. Emma missed playing the church organ, and she was lonesome for a choir and a preacher and the general Sunday atmosphere that always brought a vague feeling of uplift. But these things would all come with the growth of the country. Someday there would be plenty of neighbors and good roads, a big town, and all the ways of a settled people. Like the people of the prairies, she must live in the present, but always for the days that were to come.

There were terrifying times when the forces of winter seemed to become personified into a kind of avenging monster. Sometimes the winds roared about the bit of a house with such awful

voices that they seemed about to enter in visible form. The walls shook and the stovepipes rattled as if the whole place was about to go rolling before the wind like an uprooted tumbleweed.

When the storms passed the cold settled into such frightful intensity that the survival of life, even human, was a miracle. Sometimes in the night silence a board on the side of the house cracked like the firing of a gun. Burl often came in with a white frost spot on his nose or cheek. Suppose he broke a leg or fainted in the snow? Suppose they ran short of food or wood, even for a short time? In the grip of winter life seemed to hang by such a slender thread.

Like nearly all settlers, Burl was devoted to his pipe. In the small kitchen, shut tight against the outside cold, the pipe fumes became overpowering. Again and again Emma found excuses to go into the other room. But it was cold in there, and Burl would begin to notice. For days she struggled to overcome the feeling of illness that gradually possessed her as the air became more and more smoke-filled. Then one day Burl looked around suddenly as she tried to fan away the smoke.

"Say, this smoke bothers you, doesn't it? Why, you're pale!" He put the pipe in his pocket as he came to her.

"Don't notice me, Burl," she protested. "I'll get used to it. I want you to smoke. You get such a lot out of it."

"Do you think I'd like it if I knew what it was doing to you? Why didn't you tell me?"

"You have a right to smoke, and I'm sure I'll get over this silly feeling."

"Come over by the stove. I'll show you something."

She looked in amazement as he lifted a lid and dropped the offending pipe into the flames.

"Oh, Burl! You shouldn't!"

"Not another peep!" he commanded her.

The matter was never mentioned again. Emma marveled at his strength of will. He had done it for her. As once before, she was convinced that she had married a good man. Smoking was

neither right nor wrong, but his instant decision in her favor was something she never forgot. She could do anything for him now.

At odd times during the winter Burl worked at what he called his "farm plan." On sheets of paper he drew lines showing the borders of fields. He made black squares and oblongs representing house and barn, chicken pens, granaries, sheds, everything. He put in hundreds of little dots which he explained to Emma were trees. Sometimes these dots were in long lines, sometimes in scattered groups. Every few days he changed his plans and planted his "trees" all over again.

Emma listened to his talks about trees. She was interested in his plan to have plenty of trees. They would add beauty and shelter to the farm. But Burl had a feeling beyond their mere use or beauty. His talks were not very clear, but he seemed to regard trees almost as personalities. If he planted trees, they would be something like a perpetuation of himself into the future, like having descendants to carry on his name. Perhaps that was not exactly how he felt, but what he said sounded that way. All winter he made rows of cottonwoods and maples, groves of poplars and willows and elms, on his sheets of paper.

The months dragged on, and one day Burl said the snow was soft. The great banks melted by day and froze hard every night. It was like a contest between winter and spring, each striving mightily for his own way. While the battle raged it was almost impossible to travel anywhere. The snow surface seemed hard and safe, but underneath was a treacherous softness. Burl was constantly breaking through into the deep slush and water under cover. He was so eager to be on the land he seemed not to notice whether he was wet or dry.

Gradually winter retreated. Burl reported the first bit of bare ground. Then almost overnight the land was free of its snow burden.

"Saw a gopher today!" Burl shouted. Almost at once the purple crocuses pushed their furry jackets through the covering of old grass. From her door, open to the warmth of noonday,

Emma heard meadow larks call and answer. In the long twilight Burl said:

"Come on out! Come on, just for a minute."

They stood silent in the yard. Then down through the darkness came a faint but unmistakable gabbling of many voices.

"Geese!" Burl whispered. "Geese! They're back."

Emma did not know why he should be so excited about the familiar return of the wild geese. Perhaps it was not the geese, really, but only because they represented for him the coming of another seedtime. She watched him tramping the soggy fields, impatient for the day when the land would be dry enough for the plow. At last, when the slow oxen moved back and forth across the first field, he was happy. Emma stood at the end of the field watching the wet furrows steam in the sun.

Across the endless prairies the magic circle of life began once more. But Emma was now aware of another cycle of life even more magical than that of the fields. She was almost sure that Burl would be pleased, and yet she hesitated a long time before she told him.

"I'll have to—we'll have to get a few yards of——" She detailed several needed purchases.

Burl agreed readily and asked Emma to make a list. Then he looked at her with sudden interest.

"Say, what's all this stuff for?"

"It's not for you, and it's not exactly for me, either."

"You mean there's going to be—we're going to have——"

"We're going to have something, Burl," she assured him, "but I don't know what."

"Oh, a son!" he shouted, as if there could be no least doubt about it.

"Don't be disappointed," she warned him.

"No need of that," he said confidently. He made no other comment until he said: "There's a quarter section adjoining on the west—it's pre-emption land—guess I could get it, if I hustle. Got to have more land now—I'll go into town today—Israel Bower can fix me up the papers."

He went on, half talking to himself, planning already for the distant day when his hoped-for son might have use for land. It was all so fixed in his mind that telling him the expected heir might be a daughter had no effect. Even a son could be indifferent to land, but to Burl such a possibility did not seem worth considering.

When he came from town he exulted: "I got it! I got it!" He waved a paper. "Mrs. Zither, you'll have good neighbors to the west, anyhow."

How confident he was! And how like a boy himself with all this planning for the years to come! Emma felt sudden tears in her eyes. How terrible if she disappointed this big man-boy who relied on her so completely for his happiness! Perhaps he did not rely so much on her as a person, but rather for the part she played in projecting something of himself into the future. It was strange, Emma pondered, how men did not like their names and their personalities to die out. No doubt this was one of nature's ways of perpetuating the life cycle.

5

BURL NOW CONSIDERED HIMSELF a man of property. He spoke of the "Old Place" and the "New Place" as he formed his ambitious plans. If Emma asked him about his overtime work, he smiled knowingly, and she knew these extra hours were for the son-to-be.

In the two plowed fields the rows of wheat showed green and straight. It was astonishing how soon the rows disappeared as the thick leaves carpeted the whole surface.

Then Burl began to subdue a new field, guiding the slow oxen through the tall grass. Holding the plow in the tough sod was hard for man and beast. But it was work that had to be done

only once. Emma helped by piling the buffalo bones. The bones were white-bleached by sun and rain. She made the skulls and big thighbones and armfuls of ribs into neat piles, and Burl hauled them away. He said the bones could be sold to men who went about the country with covered wagons.

Sometimes Emma carried a fine pair of horns to the house. There were big stout horns that had belonged to some great leader of the herd, and there were small horns of half-grown calves. Sometimes flint arrowheads were hidden in the grass roots.

When Emma rested on a big white skull she thought of those other years when the vast herds spread north and south over the endless plains. For unnumbered years the Indians had battled with buffalo. Each heap of bones must have been a battlefield. It was pleasant to sit in the warm sun and dream of the times that could never come again.

Once the prairies had been filled with life and movement. Then the buffalo vanished utterly, and the Indians seemed to be going too. For a long time the bones lay scattered to the sun and the lonely winds whispered through the untrod grass. Now a new life was spreading over the plains. Perhaps this was the tide of life for which the land was really intended. But there was something a little sad in knowing that the old days were gone for all time.

In June the haying began. Only a little hay was needed for the two oxen, but Burl said before another winter they must have a cow. Emma insisted on working in the hay, although Burl urged her to be careful. There was really so little to do in the shack, and it was pleasant to be out of doors. In the heat of the day Emma rested in the shade under the wagon. But she always felt guilty. Burl was such a tremendous worker, it seemed like slacking not to help.

They made hay around the edge of a big slough on the far corner of the Old Place. All summer there was shallow water in the slough. Wild grass grew thick and tall around the margin and even out into the water. Then came a lush growth of cat-

tails and rushes and other plants that were strange to Emma. Small gulls were constantly springing up and dropping down on their floating nests. Red-winged blackbirds called from the forestlike depth of the cattails. Big green and yellow frogs hopped over the moist ground and landed with a splash in the tepid water.

Yes, it was pleasant to watch all this activity of wild life. Every creature seemed so intent on its own particular business. The slough was like a town on the wide prairie, a town full of bustling inhabitants. Their very activity was an incentive to work, and Emma seized a fork and began again piling up the hay into neat cocks. It was wonderful to rest on the way home, sunk down into the load of clean sweet hay.

Emma never could bring herself to look with indifference on the violent summer storms. Burl assured her that the storms were usually harmless, but there was something terrifying in the vivid flashes and the awful thunder that she could not overcome. Nearly always the storms came in the night, which always made the lightning seem worse than by day.

When the first wheat heads began shoving through their green sheaths, Burl was excited. He brought several stalks to the house.

"Did you ever see such long heads? And so heavy, too." Although he had just come in from the field, he said: "Let's go out and take a look."

She humored him and they went out together to the edge of his precious wheat. Like all crops on new land, the grain stood thick and tall. When the wind touched it the whole field moved like a sea of green waves. Burl gazed into the distant horizon.

"It's a great business," he said partly to himself. "We'll feed the world."

As the weeks passed the wheat shot up, tall as a man's shoulders. In the August heat Burl watched the faint yellow tinge grow brighter and brighter. Emma saw him examine the fields so often he seemed to be at it all the time. He rubbed grains from the wheat heads and turned them over and over in the palm of his hand. He chewed the grains with a slow speculation.

The day came when Emma saw the binder moving round and round the field as Burl sat proudly on the seat. The binder belonged to Sam Beeman, who lent it to Burl and Heck Phinney in these early years.

Emma no longer went to the fields. From a seat in the shade beside the house she watched the sheaves dropping from the intricate binder. Burl went out to work in the evening. He set up the sheaves into stooks, staying so long in the field that it was a marvel how he could see. One night he said:

"After harvest I might plow a little on Tom's place; just an acre or two."

"Tom's place?" she had not heard the name before.

"Oh, did I say that?" He smiled in a guilty way. "Maybe I was thinking out loud. Tom was my father's name." He went out to feed the oxen.

In a moment Emma understood. He was not only confident of a son, but he had also named him. He had even given him a farm! How impatient men were, Emma marveled. How they anticipated the time, even for years to come. No doubt Burl wanted to feel like the old patriarchs of the Bible with sons settled all about him; sons with their wives and herds and flocks and hired servants. Then, indeed, he would be a man of substance.

When the wheat was dry and hard the men helped each other build it into stacks. Burl went off at daylight to the Phinney farm or maybe to the Beemans' or Phalens'. Then Sam and Heck and Levi came in their turns, and stacks like great beehives broke the level sweep of the prairie.

Emma noticed the smell of smoke in the air, but Burl assured her there were always fires at this time:

"They're off to the west," he explained. "It's mostly grass country yet."

At night they could see a thin line of twinkling fire, and the next morning Burl plowed a few furrows around the wheat stacks and the house. With a sudden wind in the afternoon the

fire sprang into fearful life. The roar of the burning came on the wind, and Burl soaked old sacks in the water trough. In a confusion of terror Emma saw him begin to flail with a sack as a burning tumbleweed rolled across the fire guard.

Forgetful of her condition, she rushed to carry him a fresh sack from the trough. He tossed her the dry sack and battled on desperately. Again and again she ran between Burl and the well. She retained a terrified memory of little ladders of flame running up the side of the stacks, the smoking house suddenly bursting into flame, Burl grabbing her and running to the sod stable. He propped the door shut, and the roar of the fire was suddenly cut off.

Perhaps she fainted, or the fainting may have been part of a confused dream. She became conscious of great pain, and when she opened her eyes she saw the dim light of a lantern hanging from a post. She could smell the pile of hay on which Burl had placed her, and when she reached out her hand she could feel him sitting beside her:

"You all right, Emma?" he rumbled.

"Oh, Burl, have we lost everything?"

"If you're all right, there's no real loss. Listen!" She heard the rhythmic chewing of the oxen. "See, we're all here. We've nothing to worry about but you."

He could talk like that when the loss of his precious wheat must have torn him with grief!

"If I could only have helped more, it mightn't have happened," Emma gasped.

"Nobody could do more," he comforted her. "Do you feel awful, Emma?"

"Pretty bad," she whispered.

"Maybe I should go for Sarah or somebody."

"Oh, Burl! Don't leave me!" She grasped his hand in sudden fear that he might rush away to a neighbor's.

All night they rested on the hay. Emma dozed a little, but even in her sleep she seemed to hear herself groaning.

At daylight there was a knocking at the stable door. Sam and

Levi had come across the blackened prairie to enquire how they fared. Each offered shelter. Their houses had escaped.

"I couldn't move," Emma begged. The thought of the jarring wagon was impossible. Levi rushed away to bring his wife Jane.

At noon Tom was born.

6

THE TIME THAT FOLLOWED was a confused blur of weakness and half-conscious existence. Sometimes she knew Sarah was with her and sometimes she heard the voice of Levi's wife. Then the mist cleared and only a profound weariness was left. When Burl saw her looking around he explained:

"You're home, Emma; you've never been away. This is a sod house. Heck and Sam and the others rushed it up for us. We moved you in last night."

"But the stuff!" Emma said in wonder. "The table and chairs, this bed and everything?"

"Everybody brought something," Burl explained. "Nobody has much, but they all brought what they could spare. They're the greatest—the best—" His voice became husky and he turned away.

In a moment he came again to the side of her bed, and Emma turned down a quilt so that he saw his first-born beside her. He gazed for a long moment until Emma said:

"This is young Tom." She remembered the name he had used once in a kind of daydream.

"He'll surely be a good dirt farmer," Burl said slowly. "He was born in a sod stable and now he'll be raised in a sod house."

"And someday," Emma thought to herself, "he'll be buried under the sod." But she did not cloud Burl's happiness by repeating the words aloud.

There was a strange silence in the house. In the frame shack every farmyard sound, every wind voice had been audible. But such things did not penetrate the thick sod walls. Even the wildest prairie winds failed to shake this shelter which had risen out of the very heart of the prairie itself.

When Emma was able to look out on the world again she was amazed by its black desolation. An endless expanse of flat, burned-over land stretched to the horizon on every side.

"It'll all come green again," Burl had explained cheerfully. His belief in the land was amazing. He was starting again from nothing, but he had no word of bitterness over his crushing loss. His thoughts were so entirely in the future that old discouragements seemed crowded out. Or perhaps he was careful not to let her see how the loss of his precious wheat had touched him.

Before the snow came he plowed an acre or two on the new place. One sunny afternoon they walked slowly over the burned-off land. Burl carried his son.

"I want him to see his first bit of plowing," Burl said whimsically, "so he can be thinking about it all winter."

But the infant Tom evinced little interest in the field or in the strange new world around him.

"What if he should care nothing about farms?" The possibility filled Emma's thought, but she said nothing to Burl. He would shout down any such idea.

Soon the harsh days closed about the sod house. Winter dragged on its long, slow course, but the roaring storms were hardly heard inside the thick walls.

Young Tom gave little trouble. Much of the time he spent asleep in his barrel. Burl had knocked a few staves out of an old barrel. Turned on its side, the barrel made a fine cradle when partly filled with grain sacks. That was the way people managed on the prairie; somehow they made things out of whatever they had.

This was the spring that Burl came home with a great wagon-load of trees. "They're poplars," he explained. "Just little things,

but they grow fast in this country. I got 'em down on the river flats."

"Lift Tom's barrel outside and I'll help," Emma offered. It was the first mild spell of spring, and they spent a long day with the trees.

"They call 'em aspens back East, but everybody out here says poplars," Burl remembered as he scooped out a hole. "I kind of like the way the leaves rustle."

"It'll be a nice spot for Tom to play." Emma held the tree straight while Burl shoved the dirt around it.

"Maybe he'll be too busy to play much," Burl said. "There'll be lots to do on the places."

"Oh, but he can't work for years yet!" She looked down at the sleeping child in the barrel. "Not for years and years."

"Not so many years," Burl said firmly, as if he already saw his son moving in the wake of the plow.

It had been a happy day that Emma always remembered. One of those days when happiness comes without any particular occasion. It just comes. Perhaps because she had helped with the planting, they always called the trees her poplars. She never forgot how the sky looked that day and the first geese honking North and the way the sun set in a flare of flaming clouds.

Again the prairie bourgeoned with its old-time life. A sea of green covered the black sweep left by the big fire. The oxen moved with their slow sway across the fields. The sun waxed, the days lengthened, and full summer blazed across the land.

It was on a day in July that Burl left at sunrise to help Heck Phinney with a barn.

"I'll hobble the oxen and turn 'em out on the grass. Just kind o' keep an eye open," he directed her as he set off on foot.

In the middle of the morning Emma saw the oxen nibbling at the edge of a wheat field. She drove them away, turning them toward the endless grass. Because of their hobbles they moved with a stiff jumping gait. Burl had explained that this device kept animals from wandering far and yet gave them enough freedom for pasturing.

Emma eagerly sought the cool shelter of the sod house. The wind came up out of the southwest with a furnace heat. How she dreaded these hot spells! Always once, often two or three times every summer, there were several days of tremendous heat. Movement became an effort and even breathing was not easy. Burl loved the sun; he flourished in the heat. But for Emma such periods were exhausting. She tried not to show how greatly she was affected.

From time to time Emma glanced at the oxen. They seemed to have forgotten the temptation of the grain field as they moved slowly away. She shut the door against the blistering wind and went about her work in the shelter of the thick walls. She became absorbed in her duties and with young Tom, who was old enough to demand attention.

Hours later she thought of the oxen. It seemed incredible that they could disappear, but they were gone. In sudden alarm Emma crawled up the low wall of the sod stable and gazed in all directions. Far to the north there seemed to be two black specks which might be oxen. Or perhaps not. They might be trampling someone's grain field. They might wander so far that days would be lost getting them back. What would Burl say, or what would he think, even if he said nothing? He had asked her to watch and she had forgotten. Oxen were the very necessity of their existence!

I'll have to do it, Emma decided desperately. At the moment, Tom was asleep in his barrel cradle. He would surely be safe with a sheet tied across the top of the barrel! It was dreadful to leave him alone, but it was also dreadful not to get the oxen.

She fastened a thick black veil around her head and set out. The vicious wind whipped her skirt, tripping her, until she pinned it high above her knees. The sun burned like a weight across her shoulders, but she stumbled on toward the specks that might be oxen. No doubt they had turned their backs and drifted with the wind. Perhaps they sought shelter, or it might be just a natural perversity.

Whenever she thought of Tom alone, she tried to run. Her

face felt shriveled in the scorching wind. She put up her hand to her face to see if it had not actually become smaller.

The oxen were in sight now, one standing and one lying down. It was something to know they were not moving farther away. When Emma reached them she dropped into the wilted grass. Just a moment or two of blessed rest! But there could be no rest with the thought of Tom perhaps screaming and choking in terror at finding himself alone.

The oxen were tired and not inclined to move again. When Emma shouted they turned to look at her with large hostile eyes, but they did not move. She hunted for stones to throw at them, but not a pebble could be found. She uprooted clumps of grass, but the wind carried them away. In sudden desperation she forgot all real or imaginary danger. She rushed upon them, screaming and kicking and beating them with her fists. Deliberately they began to move. The animals hopped a few feet and stopped. They tried again and gave up. No doubt they were tired of struggling all day with the hampering things that bound their front feet. There could be no progress this way; the hobbles must come off.

Emma had watched Burl stoop for a moment and unfasten a hobble. It looked easy. But as she approached the first beast it seemed to glare at her and the wide horns looked cruel and sharp. There was no alternative; it must be done.

She dropped to her knees and began crawling toward the first pair of front feet. She might be slain, but Burl would find her and know she had tried to do her best. As the pillarlike legs towered above her she closed her eyes and reached for the fastening. But she was still too far away. She edged a few inches nearer and her hand found the leather cuff. The buckle was so stiff that one hand could do nothing. She forced herself closer, and both hands struggled with the leather. Her eyes were closed. She felt her nails break, but she worked on. At last the thick leather yielded and one foot was free.

When the ox felt one hobble drop away he moved off, leav-

ing Emma squatting in the grass. All right, he was free to walk. Let him drag the other one!

She made the same laborious approach and worked with the same desperate effort to unfasten the other animal. Now they could walk with free stride even if one foot did drag the heavy contraption. Emma was so weak and shaken from her efforts that for a few moments she could scarcely stand.

Then began the long trek home. The oxen were not to be hurried. The sun was not quite so hot and the wind was falling, but Emma's strength was spent. She went on by a kind of inner compulsion, without conscious feeling. She was like a disembodied spirit watching the progress of some woman across the prairie sod.

Sunset and the farmyard at last! Tom was awake and whimpering, but safe. Burl had not yet come. When Tom was fed Emma fell across the bed in a half stupor. Hunger, dust, and darkness—nothing mattered but rest, long, dreamless rest!

Burl was talking to her. She heard herself telling him she was all right, 'only tired. She felt him pulling off her boots and throwing a sheet over her.

It was long after daylight before Emma awoke. Burl had made his own breakfast and gone away hours before. When he came home after dark his mind was full of harvest problems. He said casually:

"I guess you had some oxen trouble. I saw the hobbles loose."

"They did wander a bit," Emma admitted, as if it had all been part of the day's work. Other matters pressed in upon them and the oxen episode was not mentioned again.

But the effect of the day did not pass so easily. There was nothing definite to which a name could be given. She felt her steps dragging a little and she became tired earlier in the day. It was like a spring that has been strained too far so that it will not quite snap back into place.

7

HARVEST CAME and the threshing, and another year passed into the long hiatus of a prairie winter. Burl was absorbed in the growing responsibilities of his expanding possessions.

In the midst of the third summer Fred was born. A long period of convalescence followed for Emma. The town doctor advised solemnly that she must not attempt motherhood again. She did not know how Burl felt about this limitation. Surely he must be satisfied that his name would now be carried on into the years. But it was one of those subjects they found difficult to discuss.

Burl was planning a new house for the spring. Not the great house he would build ultimately, but one that would shelter them until his dream came true. The old sod walls were beginning to settle and sag. Heavy building paper lined the walls and ceiling, but the roof leaked in twenty places. Yes, there must be a new house next year.

There were two cows now, and pigs and hens and ducks. Burl brought home a small horse which he said was an Indian pony. He hitched the animal to a heavy four-wheeled vehicle which was called a buckboard. He made a rough contrivance with runners for winter travel, which he proudly told Emma was a jumper. What odd names the settlers had for their possessions!

As they began their last winter in the old sod house a fever epidemic spread through the settlement. It began in the town, but the farm homes were not free from its contagion.

All morning Burl worked in the stable. At noon he said: "I don't feel so chipper somehow." He pulled aside the curtain that separated the bedroom. "I'll flop down for a few minutes." But his few minutes extended to hours, and by nightfall Emma was sure.

"Maybe it'll be just a light case," she encouraged. "Sometimes it's just a touch."

"Yes, maybe that's it," Burl agreed weakly.

It was terrifying to see him like this. He was always so big and active, with his great voice booming about the place all day. Suddenly Emma remembered what Sarah Phinney had said:

"It's generally children that gets it, but when it strikes grown folks it goes hard with 'em."

And now it had struck Burl!

By morning there was no doubt that the fever had come to the Zither home. Emma scrambled to the top of the house and stuck a hayfork in the roof. She tied a black scarf to the fork handle. Against the snow background someone must surely see it.

In the afternoon she saw Heck Phinney tramping across the yard. From the door Emma shouted:

"Don't come in, Heck, we've got it. The fever. Can you get the doctor to come out?"

"Sure I can, ma'am. Who's took?"

"Burl."

"Pshaw, now! That's a dang shame. I'll have the doc right out. How's the critters?"

"I don't know."

"I'll feed 'em while I'm here." He struck off to the stable.

The doctor came in the morning. He was an oldish, dissipated man whose rough ways seemed more suited to the profession of veterinary. He glanced at Burl.

"Same as all the others. No need to go into any examination. I'll send out medicines and directions. Just keep him warm. Warm as you can."

"But, Doctor, he's so warm now," Emma protested. "I thought if I kept some ice——"

"That was ten years ago. Fever theory's different now. Keep 'em hot."

"But there must be a right or a wrong way," Emma begged. "They're so different!"

"Suit yourself," the doctor shrugged. "Can't say that I think

either way will make much difference." He pulled down his cap and went away.

When the medicine came Emma followed the brief directions. Not that she had much faith in it, but she felt less helpless to be doing something for Burl. She remembered hearing people talk about fever and diphtheria and pneumonia and such epidemics. There was a common belief that such evils must run their course.

Heck came regularly. He said: "If I don't come, you'll know I can't." When the second day passed without him Emma knew that he was not coming. Somehow the animals in the stable must have feed and water. Such labor had taken Heck only a short time, but with her small strength the unfamiliar tasks added tremendously to the day's work.

It seemed utterly impossible that she could do more, and yet when Tom fell a victim to the fever, and Fred the day after, miraculously she did take on the additional work. Someone must surely come along, but as she thought about it she understood why no one could come. The farmhouses were still scattered. Even the nearest was not near. Those who were free of the plague could not be blamed if they avoided contagion, and those whose households had been smitten had their own hard way to make.

It became possible to sleep standing or propped beside the beds even for a few minutes. A kind of inner sensitiveness made her aware of even the feeblest cries from any of her patients.

Burl was hard to manage. He was so heavy and he became querulous in his weakness. One midnight he called her. He begged her to rescue sheep caught in deep snowdrifts. She listened carefully as he explained just what should be done. It was strange that he should talk about sheep, because there were none on the place. Then suddenly Emma realized the awful truth. Burl was delirious! For a time she was paralyzed with fear. There came a moment's impulse to flee from this strange man who babbled meaningless words. He was so insistent, so sure he was right in his wild demands. She must humor him; stay out of his sight for a few minutes, then tell him the sheep were rescued.

Tell him any work he asked about was all done and in fine shape.

When sick people became delirious it must mean they were very sick indeed. Was this the crisis she had read about, or did that come later? Or was it past? Emma knew so little of serious illness she felt entirely helpless. Sometimes she gave the medicines regularly. Then she skipped a day or two. Medicine or lack of medicine made no difference. When it was all gone she did not even think of how she might obtain more.

Gradually the outside world became unreal. Her whole life was contained in the narrow confines of a little sod house on a desolate sweep of winter prairie. Everything rested in her hands. What she did or did not might so easily determine the lives of all of them. She put away the possibility of herself becoming a victim. It was too terrifying to be harbored, except for the fleeting instant before she drove it out.

Sometimes Burl mumbled for hours. At other times his voice boomed out suddenly with incoherent commands. By comparison the wailings of Tom and Fred were mere whispers. There were moments when an awful fear possessed her that their little voices had ceased altogether.

One night when a fierce blizzard roared Emma made her rounds almost too worn to know what she did. The boys were so weak and quiet they could scarcely sink any lower. As Emma huddled across the foot of their bed, dimly conscious of the storm voices without, she heard a deeper voice. A low roaring, and it was inside the house!

For a moment she could not find the source of the steady sound until the smell of burning reached her. The stove! Not the stove exactly, but at the lower end of the long string of pipes a dull ring of fire glowed and crackled. The accumulation of a year of soot was burning. The stormwind drew the fire along with a fierce insistence. An acrid smoke began to ooze from the pipe joints and fill the room.

Emma watched the glow of fire move up the string of pipes to the elbow, where they turned for a long horizontal stretch before disappearing through the roof. When the fire reached the

ceiling, lined with heavy building paper, then what would happen? Could the pipes burn themselves out and not set fire to the paper? Ceiling and walls were all paper-lined. The whole interior might become a mass of flames! Curtains, bedclothes, Burl, Tom, Fred! All lost in one last and terrible moment!

How she had struggled through the long battle! But this was beyond her strength. No human help could avail. Yet in this moment of darkest despair there might be another power, a power infinitely greater than any human aid.

Emma dropped to her knees beside Burl's bed. Here she would take her stand. Here she would stay no matter what happened. No definite words came to her. Only a great soul cry for help! Just help! Help for a helpless family unconscious of its peril.

She covered her eyes and her ears to shut out the world that seemed to be crashing about her. Only the world of the spirit was left to her now. She was conscious of a great reaching out, a mighty effort to lay hold on something infinite and sustaining.

Time must have passed, but time was no part of her experience. She was aware of the physical world only through a sudden loud crashing of metal. Emma stood up. The room was growing cold. On the floor all about her lay the detached links of stove-pipe. The fire had burned out, and when the pipes became cold they had fallen apart.

There could be no question about putting them up again. Even Burl, with his height and strength, had a hard time getting them to go right. Help must be found. Heck was undoubtedly sick. Sarah and her small son could be of little help, and they also might be victims. The condition at any farmhouse was uncertain. Only the town remained as a source of help.

"I must get to town!" Emma said aloud. "I must! I must!" It might be fatal to leave the sick, but without heat they were certain to perish from the cold.

Burl and the boys were still breathing, but so thin and wasted, the life spark seemed almost ready to flicker out. Of the three, young Tom was the strongest.

Emma piled on their beds all the blankets and coats in the

house. She tied on the mass of coverings with twine strings. She put on herself all the clothing she could wear and still walk. When she was ready to strike out she looked once more at her little family:

"Good-by, my babies!" She tucked the blankets a little closer. Then she moved to the big bed. "Good-by, Burl," she whispered. He seemed to have fallen into a semistupor. "Good-by, we'll meet again—somewhere."

She pushed out into the darkness. The wind had dropped. Scurries of snow still lifted from the drifts and brought tears to her eyes, but the strength of the storm had passed.

In the stable Emma began throwing the harness on the pony. She was glad now that Burl had insisted on showing her how. He had said that every farmer's wife should know how to harness a horse. How right he had been! Perhaps every strap might not be exactly right, but it would hold. Then she was seated in the stout boxlike jumper and the pony was headed for town. It was a wise Indian animal, inured to the prairies. Every few moments Emma shouted encouragement:

"On, Gypsy, on!" The pony plunged valiantly along the trail it knew best.

As usual, intense cold followed in the wake of the storm. Emma felt the penetration of the numbing air. She wound the reins about her and tucked her hands under her arms. She pulled up her feet and sat on them and turned her face away from the wind. Nothing more could be done. All the human footsteps had been taken. Then came the curious feeling that what happened from now on was beyond her power to direct. Only at intervals she called out:

"On, Gypsy, on!"

The bitter cold crept about her. She could feel the pitching and the tugging of the jumper as the Indian pony struggled on. Emma began a detached speculation whether or not a little farm woman moving slowly through the winter darkness might ever reach town. If the horse wandered from the trail or became exhausted, someone would find the woman in a day or two, in a

week at the most. It would be interesting to know just what happened to her. Perhaps sometime it would be possible to find out, but just now the desire for sleep was more interesting than any problem. Just a brief moment of sleep! Of wonderful precious sleep!

In a confusion of voices Emma heard one louder than the rest. She identified it as Israel Bowers' and he was explaining:

"That's just the way I found her, slumped down in that hand-made contraption outside the door. I was just goin' out with the lantern to meet the early train and there she set! I knew in a minute it was Burl Zither's pony."

"What you reckon she struck out fer in the middle o' the night, Israel?"

"Somepin's mighty wrong out there," Israel explained. "Chances is she come fer the doc, but he's a bit fuzzy just now. Don't know as I blame him, the way he's been run off his feet. I couldn't get a gasted man to go out till I thought of that no-account, Butch Hodgins. We unhitched the pony and Butch jumped on its back and started out fer the Zithers'. He'll make it easy by daylight."

In her eagerness to hear, Emma sat up and they noticed she was awake. The men gathered around the cot where she had been lying; it was in the back room of Israel's post office.

"What's the matter, ma'am, if you feel able to tell?"

She told them slowly of the fire and the pipes and the fever-ridden family. The men began to move away, trying to leave without being noticed.

"Aw, they're a chickenhearted lot!" Israel scoffed. "Don't mind 'em, ma'am."

"I know. It's only natural," Emma excused them. "They don't want to carry fever to their families."

"Well, I've no family, and you can rest here long as you like."

"Who is this Butch you sent out?"

"Aw, he's only an odd-job sort o' chap!" Israel explained. "Just the man you need, though. Must have put up lots o' stove-pipes, helpin' folks 'round town."

"I must go right back," Emma urged. "You've been wonderful to me, but I can't stay here in the post office where everybody comes. I didn't mean to go in any place when I left. And my family! They're all—I don't know what I'll—" She buried her face in her hands as she remembered suddenly just how they had been left.

"There! There, now!" Israel made clucking sounds of comfort. "I'll find somebody goin' out your way. Or, if they're not, they will," he added grimly.

In an hour Israel had located Andrew Lee, whose big team and high-box sleigh offered transportation. Almost smothered in sacks and blankets, Emma sank into a heavy sleep as the runners creaked on and on over the crisp snow. After the weeks of watching it was possible to sleep anywhere.

"Here yuh be, ma'am." Emma felt Andrew shaking her as she sat up suddenly. "I looked inside, and Butch sure has it warm."

Emma ran into the house. She rushed from bed to bed. Tom was awake. Fred was—yes, he was breathing, just breathing. And so was Burl. He had hardly changed his position at all! Was he so weak or was he beginning to rest naturally? She could not tell. Perhaps even a doctor could not tell.

There was a banging at the door. It was Andrew Lee.

"How's your folks, ma'am?" he asked timidly, as if he feared the answer.

"Tom's better. The others—they're about the same."

"It's a terrible winter," Andrew said. "I—I lost a daughter." Then he pointed to a pile of parcels. "Israel sent these out. Mostly eatables, I guess. He reckoned you might forgit, with so much worry and all."

"I did forget," Emma admitted. "But I'll never forget you and Israel and everything that's been done for us."

"Twarn't nothin', ma'am," Andrew said. "We got to try an' do fer each other, times like these." He went off on his long trail across the snow.

Having a man about the place made a great difference. Every morning Butch dug enough wood out of the snow to last all

day. Except when he came in to eat, he spent all his time in the stable, even at night.

"I got a fine nest in the hay," he explained. "I'm used to campin' anywhere."

He offered to sit up every other night and look after the sick.

"But you might get it yourself," Emma objected.

"Only if my time's up," Butch told her. "Then I'd get it, even if I lived on a desert island. Bein' near folks don't make no difference, if your time ain't come."

With this fatalistic belief he took his turn as nurse on alternate nights. He seemed to understand his own philosophy. Contagion did not affect him.

This was a time for unlimited patience. Tom made rapid gains, but the other two seemed to hover in a doubtful borderland for many days. When Burl moved a hand or Fred turned his head Butch noted the gain:

"See! He couldn't do that last week! Not much like when I first come." By his very will power he seemed to lift them up from their weakness and indifference.

There came a day when Tom took a few feeble steps. In a week he went about the house without falling. One day Emma saw Burl looking wonderingly at his big hands. They were white and thin and the calluses were all gone.

"Pretty fine hands for a farmer," Emma commented. "But they won't be like that long." Burl managed a wan smile.

Only the small Fred seemed doubtful whether or not to join the company of the living. There was so little of him, such an infinitely small bit of strength, perhaps he thought the long struggle back was hardly worth while.

Every week Butch strode into town. When the snow had almost gone he said: "Guess I should hunt you up a farm man."

"Why couldn't you stay, Butch?"

"I wouldn't be any good," he explained frankly. "Folks says I can't stick at anything. I just kind o' chore around, like."

"You stuck with us when there was nobody else," Emma reminded him.

"I guess that's why I did." He seemed surprised at his unusual steadiness. "Maybe I like to show folks sometimes." The next day he brought Noah Barger out from town. Noah was a silent, bearded man, awkward and uncomfortable, except when he followed a furrow.

8

WITH THE COMING OF SPRING the old sod house began to disintegrate. The walls sagged and bits of sod began to break through the paper lining.

One sunny afternoon Heck Phinney, bundled in a greatcoat and leaning on a stick, hobbled across the fields. Burl sat in the doorway, leaning against a chair full of pillows.

"Kind of a gentleman farmer, eh?" he greeted Burl. "Well, so'm I. And I don't like it."

"Me neither," Burl said, trying to bring the old-time strength into his voice.

They avoided further talk of their long winter siege. They murmured together of crops and weather, of plans and methods and prices. When Heck tottered to his feet, ready to go again, he stared for a moment at the house:

"Say, you got a bad bulge in that west wall. Have to do something mighty quick." He stumped away, still shaking his head.

The next day eight men gathered in the yard. With saws and hammers they attacked the piles of lumber Burl had brought out in the autumn to be ready for the new house.

"We'll just rush up a one-room shack," Levi Phalen explained. "You gotta have it quick."

With incredible speed the rough building took shape. The roof was made of wide boards bent over like the half of a barrel. Just at sunset two men moved the stove and the beds.

Burl, swathed in blankets, leaned on strong arms, as he went from the old house to the new. Fred was carried in a mass of quilts. Only Tom was able to run across under his own power.

"Smells nice," Burl said as he sniffed the new lumber. "They've built us two houses now."

"They're good neighbors," Emma agreed. "We'll help them all we can."

In the morning, when Emma entered the old house to bring away the last few things, she noticed a large section of sod wall fallen across the very place where the boys' bed had stood.

When she had finished moving, Emma looked about the bare room for the last time. It hardly seemed possible that this heap of sod had been a home for more than four years. But it had sheltered them from the searing summer winds and the January blizzards. Here there had been birth, and death had hovered uncertainly for weeks. By midsummer the spot would be only a tumbled ruin. Once Burl had said he must level the rich sod and use the place for a garden. In a year not a trace would be left.

But there were other traces that would not vanish with the years. When Emma had a moment to glance in the mirror a middle-aged woman stared back at her. Could this be the same smooth-faced girl who sang in a church choir and taught a village school? And there were memories even deeper than any visible wrinkles. Conflicts of the spirit, emotional crises that had left her shaken again and again—all had taken toll.

What had been the gain of it all, Emma mused as she moved away from the old house. Would she go through with it again, foreseeing all the future? She heard Tom shouting as he ran along the rows of green poplars. She saw Fred asleep in his cradle against the sunny side of the house. Burl, frail, but alive, stood on the edge of a field where Noah plowed. Yes, Emma decided without reserve—yes, she would go through with it all again.

During the late summer the four-room house was built as Burl had planned the year before: "It's not the real house, not the Big House," he explained. "But it'll do for a time." It was far beyond any of the other places that had sheltered them.

As the boys became older, Burl insisted on church attendance. "Maybe they won't understand everything for a while yet," he explained. "But they'll get the habit. You notice it's the solid people who go to church."

Emma did not know just what he meant by "solid" people, but she welcomed the return to church. Horses had taken the place of the old oxen and the roads were good now. Going to town was no longer a great effort, as in the early days.

At first it was strange to see Burl as a church official. He attended meetings of a management committee. On Sundays he and Israel Bower solemnly passed a collection plate. Burl became church treasurer. He did not talk a great deal of his church connection except to reaffirm that Tom and Fred must have church influence.

"I had to go," he told Emma. "Maybe I didn't understand much at first, but I had to go anyway."

"The boys are so young yet," she urged. "It's hard to sit quiet so long."

"They'll learn," Burl insisted. "I had to learn that way. And I think they should keep kind o' quiet on Sundays. If they run all over the place, Sunday'll be just like any other day."

Emma was doubtful of this enforced religion, but she explained carefully to Tom and Fred what it meant. They listened dutifully, but their memories were short. They did not understand this new sternness in their father.

As the seasons passed the farmyard took on a settled and prosperous air. A big red barn stood on the site of the old sod stable where Tom had been born. Sheds and granaries and pens clustered about the big barn. The plantings of maples and poplars were shooting up into fine trees. The rawness of the early prairie was passing, and farmers had taken all the vacant land. Heck Phinney, Sam Beeman, and Levi Phalen lost something of their early exuberance as they gathered about themselves sons and daughters, herds and flocks. Herman and Elsa Schaffer became the nearest neighbors on the south. Never again could a prairie fire sweep across the land.

As the boys grew beyond the care of childhood, Emma began to think of the interests of her earlier years. There had been nothing very definite; music, writing, painting—a vague ambition for something cultural. She had no illusions of a career, only to do something in a quiet way, just enough to satisfy an old impulse. No doubt her hands were too stiff and work-worn to be of much value. Probably they could not be made really flexible again.

She wondered what Burl would think if she asked for a piano and began to practice. Or if she got materials and spent a part of each day painting, or trying to paint. He would not understand. Farm wives did not do such things. Farm work was never really done. If a farmer's wife spent time at a piano, there would be even more work not done.

Emma sometimes wondered about their financial condition. It was strange how she could not ask Burl about anything like that. The feeling came over her that she would be prying. And yet he never objected to anything she wanted. He encouraged her to buy whatever was needed. If she could not go to town, she made a list of things for him to bring from the general store. They used little money. Burl paid the yearly bills when the wheat sold. Emma felt almost sure that if she asked for a piano Burl would not refuse. And yet she hesitated.

In the weekly farm paper Emma read of the recital of Natale Gallo. A great singer had never before come to town. The paper said people were planning to come from other near-by towns. It would be a great evening.

When she asked Burl he agreed at once that they must go. He was not really interested, but he would go because of her. He did not ask about Natale Gallo or what she would sing. He just agreed good-naturedly to go. But Emma resolved to make the most of this brief contact with a world which she had lost and missed. Perhaps just for the evening she could imagine that her life had been managed differently and that she was Madame Natale. Who would know if she lived in a dream castle for a night?

The next day Emma went to town with Burl on a load of wheat. From Matthew Sneed she bought the material for a silk dress. At the back of Matthew's store his daughter sold Emma two tickets for the great Gallo concert. How wonderful to sit, all dressed up, with a lot of other dressed-up people and hear real music! Perhaps Elsa and Sarah would sit near, and Lizzie Beeman and Jane Phalen. She must fix up so Burl would be proud of her. In sudden extravagance she went back to Matthew and bought a quill for the hat she had worn on her wedding day. The rooster at home might have provided a better quill, but there was something different, something special about owning a boughten one.

For two weeks Emma worked every spare moment on the new dress. At first she decided to keep it a surprise, but Burl came in suddenly when the dress was spread out.

"How will this look?" She held the folds in front of her.

"Looks mighty shiny," he commented vaguely. "Looks fine. What is it?"

"Oh, just something!" If he didn't know, she would wait until the great night. Yes, she would wait and let him see it for the first time only when she took off her coat at the concert itself. Perhaps he had never seen a short-sleeved, low-necked dress. Well, he would see one this time! Of course the neck would not be very low, but just a little.

As the great evening drew near, Emma arranged with Elvira Minders to stay with the boys. They were really old enough to stay by themselves, but it was more comforting to know the experienced Elvira was in the house.

The weather had turned cold for late October. As the great day dawned, Burl set off with Heck Phinney to bring home their cattle from the river flats. The animals had been out to pasture all summer, but it was time they were home with a shelter at night.

"Maybe I could meet you in town," Emma suggested before he left. "Then you wouldn't have to go all the way back."

"I better not leave Heck alone with the cattle," Burl decided.

"Anyway, we might be home at noon. Perhaps three o'clock, maybe four, if we have any trouble." He rode away on the Indian pony.

Elvira came in the early afternoon. "I'll get supper when it's time, Mrs. Zither. You work away at your dress or maybe rest yourself a bit." Elvira knew everybody's kitchen and just what to do next. It was a strange sensation to lie down in the daytime. Emma could not remember when she had done such a thing. But tonight was so special she wanted to feel rested. When the boys came in from play they called out for her in alarm and came stamping into the bedroom:

"What's the matter, Mom?" Tom was amazed. "Is it night already?"

"Mom's sleepy," Fred explained. "We gotta be quiet." He tiptoed out to the warm kitchen and Tom followed.

Emma heard them telling Elvira how funny it was that anyone should be sleepy when it was not dark yet. She could not make herself sleep, but it was a special luxury just to rest and know that there would be a supper waiting which she had not planned herself. She rested in blessed, half-awake relaxing until early twilight filled the room. It was not yet time to dress, but she felt like doing it anyway, just to be different. Dress up and have Elvira wait on her like a lady. But she put the thought away from her. Burl might think she was frivolous. She must not let her concert spirit carry her too far.

Emma did not really worry until darkness came and no Burl with it. She tried to remember exactly what he said about having trouble and being later than he expected. But not like this! She went into the yard and listened for hoofbeats on the hard road. She strained to see a gleam of light from the Phinney buildings, but there were no gleams anywhere.

"He'll come any minute now," Elvira encouraged from time to time.

The time came when they could just reach the concert by rushing. There was no sight nor sound of Burl. Now they might hear half of Natale Gallo's songs. Even that would be better

than nothing. When the clock struck the next time Emma knew that it was all over. People would be going home now; telling each other how wonderful it had been; carrying away a memory they would treasure for a long time.

The boys had eaten and gone to bed at their usual hour. Emma knew that even a bite would choke her. Elvira put things back in the oven to keep hot for Burl. Then she said:

"Guess I might as well go home now. I got to work at Elsa Schaffer's tomorrow."

Emma nodded listlessly. At the moment what anyone did seemed unimportant.

When the girl had gone Emma put the hat and the silk dress in the bottom of a trunk. She did not want to see them again. She lifted the stove lid and dropped the concert tickets in the fire. The tickets seemed more than just tickets; they were a symbol of youthful hopes gone up in smoke. Emma knew now that she could never ask Burl for a piano. It was something that did not seem to matter any more.

At a time like this it was hard to be reasonable. In spite of her overwhelming resentment she knew Burl had not done this thing deliberately. Something he had not foreseen was keeping him, perhaps something serious. He should not have picked a day like this for an uncertain trip with cattle. But he wanted to get them in the barn before the first winter storm. It was a sensible thing to do. No doubt all her life would be determined by sensible things. For once, just once, she wished that Burl would do something frivolous, really foolish. Life might be more interesting if it was not so hemmed about with respectability.

Thus she argued with herself, sometimes excusing Burl and sometimes blaming him bitterly. An hour before midnight Emma heard the sounds of animals in the yard. She took the food from the oven; he might find it a little dry, but still hot. No doubt he would be full of regrets and try to make up to her for the disappointment.

He came in and sagged into his chair with weariness. "What a life! What a life!" He began to spread a slice of bread. "Say!

You shouldn't wait up like this, Emma." He speared a hot potato with his fork. "We had a bad time at the river. It was high and the critters was scared to cross. They turned back on us a hundred times, seems like." He took a long drink of tea. "Didn't think we'd ever make it." He went on and on—eating, drinking, eating, commenting on the various animals and what he planned to do with each of them.

Not a word about the lost concert! He was not sorry. He had no word of regret, because he had absolutely forgotten. It was incredible, but it was true. His miserable, common farm plans had crowded everything else from his mind. He put the condition of a yearling steer against the glorious song of Natale, and the steer had won! Even if he cared nothing for music, surely her happiness meant something to him. But apparently not!

When Burl went out for the last look at his beloved animals, Emma rushed to the bedroom. For the first time in her life she wept in pity for herself. No word of the lost concert was ever spoken.

9

IN HER QUICK GLANCE through the weekly paper Emma noticed a most unusual announcement:

PARIS BEAUTY SPECIALIST

*Will be in your town Wed. Thurs.
Fri. Have your real self developed
by our expert operators.*

\$10. FULL TREATMENT. \$10.

At first Emma gave the advertisement but a passing thought. It was probably the first time that the small prairie town had

been visited by beauty experts. Well, times were changing and city ideas were reaching out even to the remote towns. Emma wondered idly who would be tempted to try the rejuvenating effect promised by the experts. Perhaps Jennie Beeman and Lydia Harkness. Malvina Helland might go or Rachel Bayard. Town women for the most part. There would be a few farmers' wives. The sun and wind would soon obliterate all traces of the experts' work. A foolish extravagance for such a short time of satisfaction! Elsa Schaffer might try. She was the most up and coming of the farmers' wives, and Herman could easily afford such a whim.

It was hard to know just when some inner voice seemed to say: "Why not Emma Zither?" But Emma answered this voice of temptation: "Such foolishness!" What would Burl say? Probably nothing. But what would he think? He must regard her as having an unexpected frivolous streak to toss away ten dollars on something that could last only a few hours or several days at the most.

And yet the idea persisted. Why not, after years of work? It was surely coming to her to indulge in one little fling of vanity. Could anyone blame her if she was curious to know how she would look at her very best? She remembered the pictures of sleek-looking women in the occasional magazine. No doubt they were kept that way by constant visits to beauty experts.

Again and again the notion was put aside. But it would not stay put. Emma feared she might be the only farm woman who could not resist the lure. Yielding might make her conspicuous and the object of talk. If only Elsa could be persuaded to go, then there would be at least two foolish women. It was a thought.

In midafternoon Emma went across the fields to the Schaffer farmyard. She heard Herman working in the barn. His wife would be alone.

Elsa's ample bulk welcomed her at the kitchen door.

"I'll sit awhile. It's only carrot strudel I make, anyway."

They talked of nothing for a few minutes till Emma said:

"There's some beauty experts coming. I wonder if you'd like to try them?"

"Me try to be beautiful!" Elsa's comfortable laugh mocked the idea.

"I didn't mean to be serious about it," Emma tried to explain. "I just thought it might be kind of an adventure, just something foolish after all our hard work."

"That way, I see it." Elsa comprehended at once. "We expect nothing, only we have some fun."

"That's it exactly." Emma was relieved at the other's easy understanding.

"Herman will laugh and yell and make believe like I am crazy." Elsa laughed at the mental picture of Herman's antics. "Yes, we go in. I do it only to see Herman take on."

They arranged the details of time and place.

Now that she was committed to the foolish adventure, Emma regretted her rashness. Burl had not Herman's sense of humor. He had become serious and dignified with the years. If only he could look on the thing as a prank and not as a serious exhibition of vanity! But the agreement was made. Elsa had promised to call for her Thursday morning and they would drive in together.

The big room above the blacksmith shop had been curtained into small spaces like stalls in a barn, Elsa commented in a whisper. A smooth-looking girl spoke to them:

"You want the full treatment, of course. Come this way." She led them past several enclosed cubicles. "You'll be through about the same time; you can meet here."

"Maybe I don't know you again," Elsa giggled as she disappeared.

In her own booth an operator regarded Emma for a moment. "Sun! Dry winds! It's terrible!" She shook her head sadly over the obvious ravages of climate. "Sit here, please. Just lie away back. Relax."

Emma felt smooth fingers on her face and neck. She saw the girl apply a black substance that looked like mud.

"Yes, it's mud," the operator answered her unspoken question. "But a very special kind. We'll just let the pack stay on for a while, then work in the creams."

There followed a number of processes that Emma forgot to count. It was restful just having someone smooth away the wrinkles, whether or not her looks were improved. After a long time the girl said:

"You can ease off awhile now. Have lunch or something and come back at one and we'll have your hair set."

Elsa was waiting. "Sure, I know you, even the first minute."

"We're not changed much." There was a hint of disappointment in Emma's voice.

"But I feel awful clean and kind of smooth," Elsa tried to explain. "My girl told me not much difference in looks till the hair is fixed. And eyebrows. What do you think! We get eyebrows, even!" Elsa laughed at the unusual prospect.

"Now what, till one o'clock?" Emma was a little uneasy at the unexpected length of time.

"Your family is all right," Elsa assured her. "Maybe now we go to a little place behind the bakery store and eat."

Yes, why not do everything? It was the first day away from home for years, and perhaps years to come without another.

In the small restaurant Elsa burst into chuckles: "If Herman could ever know I come into town to get mud slathered in my face!" Her voice was lost in a spasm of laughing. "And so much mud we got in the back yard, even."

"But not special mud!" Emma began to feel the holiday spirit.

"It couldn't be special," Elsa agreed. "It don't cost nothing."

They walked slowly down the street. In front of the barber-shop Henry Stubbs gave them an elaborate bow:

"You ladies come in for the baths?"

Somehow it seemed bold to speak of baths. Emma said nothing, but Elsa answered:

"You could do worse, even."

Henry gave a loud guffaw, and when they were past Elsa giggled. "I feel again like a girl almost at school."

It was a day they could remember for a long time.

Back in the beauty booths the important business with the hair began. Emma remembered how for a time when she was first married she had curled her straight hair. But it had taken precious time to heat the tongs over a lamp chimney. After a while she had twisted her hair into a quick nob just to keep it out of the way.

Now the girl tried several effects, standing back to survey her work, then trying again.

"I'd like to do something in a loose wave, but it wouldn't last long," she explained. "Better have rather tight curls; they're most lasting in the wind."

This was the most monotonous of all the operations. The girl disappeared for long periods, evidently looking after several customers at the same time.

Then Emma felt the work begin on her eyebrows.

"Too light and thin," the girl commented as she worked. "We'll just darken the lines a bit. Just to be really definite. Now a little shadow under the eyes—that's for romance and mystery, you know." She worked deftly and explained: "Just a nice dusting of powder to make everything smooth. Now a touch of color on the cheeks. There you are, all done. You really look fine, and I hope you'll keep that way as long as you can. Come and see us when we're here next time. Look in the big mirror down the hall."

In a moment Emma was gazing at herself. Or at least she supposed it must be herself. Or was this the real Emma and the woman who came into town this morning only a temporary person? Her straight hair, inclined to be wispy, lay in a perfect mass of little curls. No hair straggled down from the clear-cut edge of curls. Her powdered neck, so white and free from wisps, looked like something in marble. But the eyes that gazed back at her were the real triumph. Under the new and slightly arched brows they seemed so large. Or perhaps it was that shadowy stuff the girl had so skillfully applied. Anyway, it was amazing—the

whole combination. It was hard to stop looking, but she must find Elsa.

In walking, Emma found her shoulders unconsciously straightening. She moved with a new poise, a kind of dignity which seemed to belong to the worth-while personality she had assumed. While she looked as the mirror told her, it was impossible to hold herself carelessly.

In the middle of the floor she met Elsa. They stared at each other without words. Then with a strange instinctive gesture they kissed each other. This was part of woman's heritage. This is the way they should look, sometimes at least. It was not right that the hard years should so rob them of what nature had given. Emma felt a wave of sympathy for all farm women, and tears sprang to her eyes.

"Don't do it!" Elsa warned. "You spoil yourself. Wait even if you can a few minutes. See what it is here."

She led Emma to a kind of bay window at the end of the big room. Here a traveling photographer had shrewdly set up his shop. He knew that women fresh from their rare visits to a beauty parlor could hardly resist having their newly found charms made permanent.

"Oh, do you think we should?" Emma was tempted, but she remembered the time and money already spent.

"It's our day," Elsa said with unaccustomed recklessness. "We do everything."

Emma concentrated in hard thought. Tomorrow a little of what she had today would be gone. Next week nearly all gone, and next month not a trace. Perhaps in discouraged moments it might help if she could look at such a picture and try to believe it was her real self. Perhaps by looking at it she could be induced to believe that such a person had no reason for discouragement. Elsa broke into her mental debate:

"I get a picture and keep to show Herman. When he is uppish I put the picture to him. Then he see how lucky he is." She laughed as she planned how Herman might be disconcerted.

"It's something to think about," Emma agreed seriously. She

was not at all sure how Burl might react to the sudden display of such a picture. She had thought only of its effect on herself. "Let's do it, anyway. You go first."

The man of art poked his head under the black cloth many times and changed his heavy plates. But at last the business was done. The photos would be finished and sent back in a few weeks.

The town holiday was over. They turned homeward across the railway tracks and along the south trail. When the women parted Elsa said:

"When I go to bed I think I put a stick of wood under my neck."

"It's a shame to muss such lovely hair," Emma agreed. "I don't know what I can do, but I'll be careful as long as I can. Anyway, we've had a lovely day."

"I wouldn't know about it except you told me," Elsa said gratefully.

"And I wouldn't have had the courage to go without you," Emma admitted.

Elsa drove off into the early dusk of late autumn.

Without Elsa's heartening presence Emma felt suddenly alone and almost guilty, like a small girl returning after running away from home. She had told Burl of the expected trip to town with Elsa. The table had been set for noon, and with threshing finished there was really no great rush of work. But he knew nothing of the beauty parlor or the pictures. He was still hammering in the barn by the glow of a lantern.

Emma slipped into the house. She had left everything cooked for supper. She worked with speed, yet conscious of being careful to protect the precious curls and the perfect complexion. When Burl came in supper was waiting. Emma called out from the bedroom, "I'm back. Where's the boys?" She tried to be unusually matter-of-fact.

"Playing around the stacks, I guess." He was also just his ordinary self, neither angry nor glad that she had been away and come back.

"It's time they came in." Emma was still reluctant to come into the light. She heard Burl walk to the door and shout with his tremendous voice:

"Boys! Boys!"

When Tom and Fred rushed to their places at the table Emma came out and began carrying dishes from the stove. In his chair, Burl calmly read the paper. The boys began to eat. Then Tom looked up:

"Maw, can I have . . ." His voice trailed off. "Gee!"

She saw him nudge Fred, and both boys stared at her without a word.

"What did you want, Tom?" She tried to be unconcerned, but she knew her voice was stiff.

In his bewilderment Tom forgot to answer. He had never heard of beauty treatments. His mind wrestled with the problem. He stared at someone who was his mother, yet not his mother. Except for Burl's uncertain reaction, Emma knew she would have laughed aloud at the mystified faces of her young sons.

After a time Burl must have become conscious of the unusual silence. He glanced at the motionless boys.

"What's the matter with you, Tom? Fred?"

"It's Maw!" Tom said in an awesome whisper.

"Go ahead, now!" Burl commanded. "Don't play at the table."

"But it's Maw!" Tom insisted.

Then Burl looked at Emma for the first time. It was almost comical how his face took on exactly the same expression as that of his young sons. For a long moment no one moved or spoke. But Burl recovered before the boys. In front of them he did not like to admit that anything astonished him. He felt that a father should know everything and never show surprise. Thus his sons would look up to him as the source of all wisdom. To show now that he did not understand their mother's transformation and that he had not been consulted about it would cause him to lose caste in their eyes.

All this came to Emma in a flash of understanding. She saw now that she should have told him. Burl did not like surprises

as Elsa's Herman did. He felt that surprises took him at a disadvantage. In the early days he had been offhand, almost hilarious at times. But the years, with the responsibilities of fatherhood and larger and larger property, brought a dignity that became almost pompous. Sometimes Emma wished for the old shouting Burl of homestead days. He was not easily offended then.

Now he said quietly, "Go on with your supper, boys."

Emma felt that his voice held a rebuke for her also. He would not admit such an intention, but unconsciously he had shown his hurt pride. The splendid surprise had been a failure. She felt the happy expectation drain out of her, leaving her dry—like a squeezed sponge.

Slowly Tom and Fred began to eat again. Burl also, but his movements were awkward, as if he sat in the presence of a stranger. Silent and uncomfortable, they carried on. Emma tried to speak, but she feared her voice would break into weeping. She knew Burl must also be thinking desperately for something to say. The longer the silence became, the harder it was to find a way out.

Emma felt her tears begin to brim over. Trying to move without haste, she found the shelter of the bedroom. Only then did she let herself go, smothering her sobs in the pillow.

After a time she heard the boys go soberly to bed. Then Burl went out for a last inspection of the animals in the barn. Now was her chance. She dipped a cloth into a pan of warm water on the stove and scrubbed her face. She rumbled her hair, pulling the curls through her fingers to make them straight again. In the morning she must wash her hair, then all traces of the unfortunate day would be gone.

Burl was a long time coming in. In his own stiff way he would be full of regret, trying, no doubt, to find a way back to a normal relationship. When he did come Emma was in bed and the light out. As she felt his big hand touch her in the darkness she knew he was sorry for their flare of misunderstanding. She pressed his hand to show him it was all right. They never spoke of the unhappy incident.

IO

THE LONG PRAIRIE WINTER BEGAN. The daily round had never before seemed quite so monotonous. But no slightest hint of how she felt must escape. To Burl and the boys she must be the loyal wife and mother, regardless of all feeling.

Perhaps lack of strength accounted partly for her waning interest in the affairs of the farm. There were times when she finished her long day only by a strong will power of compulsion. Cooking and washing and mending, always for four, and in the summer hired men, carpenters, and threshers were added to the regular family.

Sometimes Emma wondered if it would be wise to tell Burl that the day might come when she could not keep up her end. It was strange how she shrank from such a confession. There had never been a discussion about her work, but somehow he had such an air of expectancy that work was done without any need of words. He was always kind, but Emma knew from his opinion of other people how greatly he admired efficiency.

On stormy days, when Tom and Fred could not get out, the noise in the small house became terrific. They were full of restless energy, and Emma would not have had them otherwise. When she thought of them, thin and helpless with fever, she rejoiced that they were just what they were.

The boys had a passion for playing with wood. In the wood-yard they piled and repiled the cut sticks. They made tepees out of the long slender poles that came from the river. They coaxed to go with Burl when he went after a load of willow and poplar brushwood. He had bought them each a small hatchet. They chopped and hacked at the little sticks, not really cutting much, but amusing themselves for hours. One day at noon Tom asked:

"Can we go over to Scud's place? We want to show him our

tomahawks." He meant the new hatchets. Emma glanced at Burl, who nodded in a half-absorbed way behind his paper.

"I guess it's all right," she told them. "Ask Mrs. Phinney to tell you when it's four o'clock and come right home." With loud war whoops and waving hatchets, they started across the snow fields. At least for one afternoon there would be quietness in the house.

Suddenly Burl put down his paper. "Where's the boys?"

"You said they could go over to Phinneys'," Emma explained.

"Did I?" He looked out at the bright sun. "I guess it's all right. But it comes dark early."

"I arranged about that," she told him. "They'll start home at four."

Burl went off to his work in the barn. From time to time Emma glanced at the clock. Shortly after four she could see two little black specks against the distant snow. The boys would be home in good time. After their long walk in the cold Emma could almost hear them shouting how they were starving. She added two more potatoes to those baking in the oven.

She started suddenly with the sensation that the house was shaking. Perhaps one of those faint spells that sometimes swept her at uncertain moments. She began turning the potatoes to bake on the other side when Burl slammed into the house:

"Look! Look outside!"

Emma rushed to the window. "Why, what's happened? What is it?" Only an opaque world of white met her gaze.

"Blizzard!" Burl explained. "Never saw one just like it. I happened to look west, and there was a white wall rolling along like a tidal wave. All I could do to get in. They wouldn't let the boys start now. They'll have to stay all night."

For one wild moment Emma said nothing. But he would have to know. "Oh, Burl! They did start. I saw them. About half-way."

"What! You did?" Burl shouted. "Sure?"

"I couldn't be sure. But there were two. They were coming this way."

"But you just couldn't be sure!" Burl insisted. "Maybe you saw two dogs." How he grasped at every hope!

Then Emma told him everything. "I told them to leave at four. Just after that I saw these two specks. Oh, Burl! It's the boys. I know!"

"I guess it must be!" he admitted. Suddenly he grabbed his greatcoat and cap. "I got to go, Emma. I got to!" He lifted the latch and the door flung back against him. "I'll try. Just a minute!" he shouted as he slammed the door.

In a few minutes he crashed in, bringing a whirl of snow and wind. His face was plastered and his eyebrows were hanging with matted snow.

"I went around the house just once," he panted. "All I could do." He blinked his eyes free of snow. "There must be something!" He looked about the room as if seeking an answer. Then he leaped on a chair and brought down a ball of twine from the top of a cupboard.

"Don't try!" Emma begged. "You'll be lost in a minute."

"I'll tie this to the clothesline ring at the corner of the house." He cut off a long piece and fastened one end about his waist.

"But it might break!" Emma was terrified.

"Twine couldn't break. I'll wander out, far as I can." He pulled down his cap. "Lost people often get close to home but don't keep on quite far enough. Maybe I can go out just enough to bring 'em in." He tried to comfort her, but there was little confidence in his voice.

Several times he floundered into the roaring tumult. At last he was too exhausted to try again. Full darkness had come down with the storm.

"I couldn't find anything, unless I stepped on it." He sagged with weariness and discouragement.

"Don't go again," Emma begged. "Oh, Burl! If anything happened to you I'd—" She clung to him in an agony of fear.

"I can't just sit here!" His voice was hoarse with emotion. "I think too much."

Emma knew exactly what his thoughts must be. Over and

over again he would be picturing two little forms suddenly overwhelmed with smothering storm. She could hear them cry out in fear. Hand in hand, they would stumble on, groping and terrified. When their small strength failed they must sit down or fall down. After that—— But Emma tried to keep her imagination from going beyond that point. She forced her thoughts to start all over again, but inexorably she reached the place where two little figures sprawled into the snow. And Burl's thoughts must be making the same picture, again and again, until he was driven to search once more, although the effort was really useless.

After a time Emma let him go without protest. She understood his terrible urge to be doing something. It helped to deaden thought. Each time he went out she built up the fire and brewed a fresh pot of tea. It was something to do.

No thought of sleep came to either of them. All night Burl alternated the long hours with his searching and resting, searching and resting. He must have known long ago that if the boys did not come near the house within the first hour of blizzard, they could not come at all. But he kept up the search. To drop his foolish illusion would be to drop all hope. He just could not bring himself to do it.

Deep lines of weariness seamed his face. His eyes were red from pounding with the gale-driven snow. They said almost nothing to each other now, as if they feared the implication of any words they might use. Talk was such a futile thing!

It was impossible for Emma to keep her thoughts from straying to the days ahead. She saw Burl as prematurely aged, silent and embittered, going about his work mechanically, all ambition and objective lost. His mind would trace the tragic details of this night a thousand times. Somewhere in the sequence of events he might come to blame her. He might feel that she had interceded for the boys; she had fixed their return at four o'clock when it might so easily have been an hour earlier. In his grief it would be natural to distort a word, even a look. He would say nothing. But always between them through the years this wordless accusation would obtrude itself, an intangible barrier forever.

Such an existence would be but a living death and not to be endured for long. Pondering the future, there came a sudden flash of the past. Emma remembered that other winter's night of tempest when it seemed almost inevitable that the boys, and Burl, too, would perish in a holocaust of fire. She remembered how, as the fire roared in the pipes, she had reached out to an infinitely sustaining power when human aid was hopeless.

Why not now? Surely now was a time when their own struggles availed nothing! Instinctively she dropped to her knees in a desperate appeal, wordless but fervent with desire and belief. The everlasting power did not change in a year or in a lifetime. She had reached it once and she could reach it again. It was not too late. It was never too late. Time was unknown to the great infinity she sought. A strange verse that she had chanced to read in church came clearly:

"That which hath been is now, and that which is to be hath already been." Its seeming contradictions had meant little once, but now it meant everything. In the world of the Spirit there was no time, no past or future. She could put her boys in the infinite care, the same now as at the beginning of the storm. If time could defeat the all-powerful, then there could be no such power.

She saw herself and Burl and all human beings struggling and grasping in their blind, feeble efforts. How hard they battled for their few years of life, striving so desperately for little things! If only they could let go! If they could but understand and live, even for brief moments, in that world of timeless infinity!

Her turmoil of spirit had passed. When Emma arose she saw Burl regarding her with somber, hopeless eyes. She was able to go to him. She was able to say in a natural voice:

"Don't struggle any more, Burl. It's all right. It's not in our hands now."

She pushed him into a chair and he continued to gaze at her. She could feel his resentment because she had assured him it was all right. With the long night of exhaustion heavy upon him, he

fell asleep in the chair. Emma brought a quilt from the bed and threw it over him.

When she became conscious of the silence she breathed on the window frost and peered through the round spot. The storm had passed with the night. A pale sun peered over the edge of a world of white. Even in the house she could feel the cold, the piercing cold that comes when a storm has cleared.

Burl awakened with a start when she clattered a stove lid. "What's happened?" He leaped to his feet and then he remembered. "I got to go."

Emma handed him a steaming cup. "We'll both go."

"No! Not you!" His voice was harsh, although he did not mean it that way. "You—you wouldn't want to be—there."

Emma understood. He was afraid the sight of what he might find would be too dreadful for her. But she kept putting on her heavy things. She shoved the porridge kettle into the oven.

"It'll keep warm there. They'll be hungry when they get home."

She saw Burl look at her with pity. No doubt he thought she was losing her mind. But she had not lost anything. Instead she had found something of priceless value. For a moment she thought Burl was about to prevent her leaving the house. But he seemed to decide that humoring her could do little harm now. He was so sure nothing worse could happen.

They set out over the hard-packed drifts. Even without a wind the cold was intense. They would cross the fields toward the Phinney farm.

Although Emma did not look at Burl directly, she was conscious that he examined every lump of snow, every unusual formation in the level contour of the surface. Once they came to a rounded hillock. Burl dug frantically into the snow with his mittened hands. He reached the top of a stout clump of buffalo bushes. Then he straightened from his task and they went on together without words.

There were no tracks and no signs of life anywhere. Only a white owl sat on the top of a snow-covered strawstack. As they

moved on, Emma wondered vaguely how the owl had managed to live through the fierce onslaught of the blizzard. It was wonderful how any small creatures could come through. But they did. There were ways of preserving life even through the wildest storms.

As Emma looked at the solitary owl she saw at the foot of the stack a shapeless thing seeming to rise out of the snow. When a second shape took form beside the first, there could be no doubt.

"Burl! The boys!" she screamed.

He turned to grab her, no doubt fearing she was about to become violent. Then he glanced to where she pointed.

They were coming forward now, with slow, stiff steps, but they were coming! Burl leaped to meet them with a cry like a wild man. He scooped them up, one in each great arm. He had no words at all—nothing but to hold them close.

Fred asked: "What's the matter, Mom? What you cry for?"

"We're just so glad to see you, that's why. Just so glad!"

"But we're all right, only cold and awful hungry." He looked wonderingly from one to the other, no doubt marveling that parents should shed tears. Tom wriggled down to the snow, embarrassed by his father's strange emotion.

"There's Scud," Tom said, waving. In the Phinney farmyard dark figures were moving over the snow as if they were about to join the search. Burl moved his arm slowly up and down three times. It was the signal of "All's well" they had used in the early days. Heck saw the sign and made the old answer.

"Can't we eat now?" Tom urged. The united family began the homeward trek.

"I saw the blizzard," Tom explained. "And I heard it too. We stopped just a minute to look in our old straw cave where we play every day. Fred was just starting to crawl out and I shouted: 'Get back in!' Then I wiggled in too, and just as I got the snow slab shoved in the door the blizzard went 'Squish! Squish!'"

"No, it was 'Whizz! Whizz,'" Fred explained.

"Aw, I was at the front, I know." Tom asserted his leadership. "We got a lot of straw pulled out at the back of the cave, just like a bed."

"And we thought we'd be too scared to sleep, it was so dark," Fred interrupted.

"I wasn't scared," Tom shouted. "I had my old tomahawk." He still clutched his new hatchet. "I guess we went to sleep just like in a bed, but when I got awful hungry I knew it was morning. So I pushed down the door and I could hardly see, on account the sun was bright on the snow."

"I could see," Fred boasted. "And I was the first to see you comin' after us."

"So could I, if I'd been turned that way." They went on explaining and arguing until they were in their chairs at the kitchen table. Then, for a time, all talk ceased.

For days afterward Burl went about his work in a preoccupied silence. He did not admit how greatly the experience had shaken him. Emma, watching him, wondered if he might inquire what she had discovered of that great world of the spirit. But he said nothing. She knew he did not like anything emotional. He was always embarrassed and avoided any approach that seemed to be leading toward discussion of an inner life. Perhaps she hoped he might say something, but it was hard to begin without encouragement. Gradually he became his old self and their experience during the night of storm and stress was never mentioned.

Emma often wondered about Burl—the real Burl. She knew only the surface man, the man who made Tom and Fred sit motionless every night while he read a chapter from the Bible. She knew the man who never missed a Sunday from church and who made his sons go with him. These were the sons who must observe a Sabbath decorum through a long, hard day.

Yes, Burl insisted on a deep respect for religious form. But what did he really believe? He was such a tremendous worker that time to him was something valuable. And yet he spent some of his precious time at church meetings and driving about the country on church business. Emma respected him for his devo-

tion to church affairs, but within her own mind she wondered why he did it.

Did he derive some prideful satisfaction, some feeling of personal importance in a purely temporal way? Perhaps he had some deeper reason, some intangible feeling that this sacrifice of time would be counted to his credit in some future state.

Yes, that was really the big question. Did he believe definitely in a future life? What did he think about it? Did he ever wonder if they would meet again and know each other? Perhaps he expected to go on in somewhat the same way as in his life on earth. Or was the future for him but a fearful vagueness, dark and mysterious and perhaps even doubtful?

Emma often wished they could talk about these things. There were people who believed that putting a thing into words helped to bring it to pass. Burl seemed to be one of these people. Whenever the talk veered toward this speculative future he became uneasy; he thought of something that had to be done in the barn or the fields. It was peculiar that one so devoted to the church should avoid so important a part of church belief.

II

EMMA ALWAYS REMEMBERED the morning when Robert Faulkner suddenly appeared around the corner of the henhouse. It was late spring, almost summer, and she had paused a moment to watch the sunlight spread over the fresh green of the fields. She had two eggs just from the nest when the strange man appeared.

"Ah, just what I wanted to ask about—eggs!" He smiled at her start of surprise. "I didn't mean to come along all of a sudden."

"It's all right," Emma assured him. "I guess I didn't expect anyone so early."

"I'm Robert Faulkner; sometimes they call me Professor." He

smiled as if it was absurd that he should be so called. "I'm digging bones along the river. I have a crew of five men. We'll need milk and eggs this summer. Your farm seems to be the nearest—so?" He spread his hands in appeal.

"Why, yes, I guess you could have milk and eggs," Emma agreed slowly. "We have plenty." She was thinking of what he had said about digging bones. It was such odd work.

They talked of the needed quantities of milk and eggs. Then he said:

"I'll send a man after the stuff every day. We'll appreciate being able to get it fresh all summer. I mustn't keep you from work, or myself, either." With a wave of his hand he was gone.

That was the beginning. Making a contact with the outside world was in itself exciting. It helped one to remember that there were other interests besides wheat and cows and weather. For Emma it was like touching the edge of a circle in which she had once hoped to move. She had almost forgotten there were educated people who created things of beauty; who were interested in books and pictures and music. Of course there must be those who produced food for the country, but this single interest year after year could become monotonous beyond belief.

Emma often wondered why farmers could not do what they had to do without becoming all farmer. Doctors could be interested in books; merchants collected pictures; explorers made sculpture or wrote stories or played a piano. But first and always a farmer was a farmer. Emma sometimes imagined what farmers would say if she suggested that they might have secondary interests. Of course they would never follow such a suggestion and they would also suspect her of being a little queer in talking about it. She could not discuss this with Burl, because already she knew his reaction. He would feel she was dissatisfied with her farm life in general and with him in particular.

As the days passed and she became a little acquainted with Robert Faulkner he came to represent a perfect combination of interests. He did not send a man for the milk and eggs as he

promised, but he came himself, usually in the early morning. Almost at once he made clear why he followed the odd business of digging for bones.

Ages and ages ago, running into millions of years, it seemed that the prairie country had been a tropical swamp. Incredible monsters roamed through the steaming jungles. Then the earth changed, and with the coming of the ice age the monsters perished. They were buried under layers of sand and gravel and rock. Then, as more centuries passed, the river cut its way through these layers, bringing to light again the remains of the strange monsters.

The names were almost as formidable as the creatures themselves. There were flying reptiles and walking birds and lizards whose favorite pasture was the tops of trees. The dinosaurs were a large family, including a thunder lizard that shook the soft ground with its tons of ponderous tread. Daily it plucked hundreds of pounds of succulent growth from the treetops.

"We've just found a triceratops," the young professor explained one morning. "A beautiful creature with a thick bone shield above each eye. It had a wide-boned collar flaring around its neck like the frills women wore in Elizabethan times. This monster never got its growth; it just kept on increasing as long as it lived. If we could only find its egg I'd be happy."

"Egg!" Emma echoed in surprise. Sometimes she wondered if his marvelous stories were entirely true. "You mean like a hen's egg?"

"The same general idea," he laughed. "But rather longish and leathery, like eggs of snakes, turtles, alligators, and families like that. The Andrews expedition found eggs in the Gobi Desert. I'd be famous if I could find just one petrified stony egg."

"I wish I could find one for you," Emma said wistfully as she put his allotment of eggs in the basket.

"The museum would probably give you a title. You'd be Lady Emma Zither, the famous egg expert." They laughed together over his absurdities.

"I shouldn't talk shop every day," he apologized sometimes. "It must be awfully tiresome for you."

"Oh no, it's not!" Emma denied eagerly. "I'm so anxious about that egg a million years old. I do hope you find one."

"It might be ten million," he laughed. "After an egg gets up in years like that, a few million make little difference."

Once he suggested that she might like to visit his camp. "We've been a week chiseling a brontosaurus thighbone out of the rock. You might like to see it. We'll pack it in a crate tomorrow."

"I might go sometime," Emma promised vaguely. It was haytime already, to be quickly followed by harvest.

"We might have a pterodactyl next week. You'd like that. It's the great flying lizard, you remember. Wings twenty feet across, like a bat. See, like this!" He opened a textbook filled with pictures and diagrams. "I think we found a print of its claws yesterday." He was as excited as a boy. In winter they would set up the bones in skeleton form so that thousands of people might come and stare at the monsters that lived when the earth was young.

Of course Burl knew about the bone-digging crew. He knew that his farm sold them food supplies. To him their labor appeared so useless that he could not even pretend interest when Emma tried to explain the purpose of the excavating.

"Digging old bones don't help anything. Nobody can use bones. What's the good of it?"

"But isn't it wonderful to know about what the world was like? Why, right here where our house stands might have been a bronto . . . a lizard's nest."

"Might have," Burl agreed briefly. "Or it might have been over in the slough. What difference does it make?"

Emma could not awaken his interest, and after a time she did not try. Apparently he did not object to the sale of his produce, even to those who spent their days in useless labor.

When Professor Robert sometimes came a little later than usual Emma felt a vague disappointment. He would explain they were lifting a very special jawbone or a section of tail

vertebrae from its ancient bed. It was important to watch that no fragment became lost. One morning he said:

"Someday, if you have time, I'd like to stay a few minutes longer than usual. I'd try, if I could, to describe what we think the land looked like in the age of monsters. Then next winter, when the prairies are just one great snow field and life seems monotonous, you can create this imaginary world and perhaps it will help a little."

"Oh, I'd love to do that!" Emma agreed instantly. "It does help to try and live in another world when this one presses in too hard." She decided she could arrange her work and have him stay a little longer on Thursday.

It was something of a shock to Emma to discover that she had been fixing herself a bit for these morning visits. Slipping on a clean apron was nothing; all women did that much if a caller was expected. A fresh dress was only a step more. Five minutes with the curling tongs to make the front hair fuzz a little was something she should do anyway. Unconsciously, and without thought of its implication, she had been giving greater and greater attention to her appearance. Why did she do this just because a milk-and-egg man called for a few minutes? Of course he was more than that, and where he came from no doubt the women he met were always neat and well dressed. He would expect to see her looking as much as possible like those other women. It was not hard to persuade herself to look her best.

On Thursday morning they sat on a plank in the shade of the henhouse. Tom and Fred were on their way to school, and Burl had long been in the hayfield.

"I hope you can see this picture as I do." Robert Faulkner seemed doubtful of his ability. "I'm not an expert with words, but you've been a teacher. Perhaps you can fill in where I miss."

"You'll do fine," Emma encouraged. "I've been reading the books you lent me. I can almost see the monsters already."

"You were able to read those books? Say, that's fine!" He was genuinely pleased. "I thought perhaps you took them just to be polite."

"I like study—what little I have time for." Then she added a little sadly: "It reminds me of a long time ago."

"I'm sure I understand." His voice held a note of sympathy. After an awkward little silence he said: "Now shall we move back a few million years?"

"Yes, let's go!" She was instantly responsive to his mood.

"First of all, let's just imagine all this took place right here on your own farmland, and by the number of bones we are finding, it probably did."

"Yes, we'll have it here," Emma agreed. "Then any time I can look from the window and see it all over again."

"That's the spirit! Now, first let's have all these flatlands covered with a tall growth of great tree ferns, giant reeds, horse-tails, and all sorts of odd tropical vegetation we know little about."

"The monsters can use it for their pasture," Emma laughed.

"Exactly what they did!" He was pleased that she knew how to live in this prehistoric world. "Let's suppose now that these swamps of ours have been hot and steamy for ages and plenty of monsters have evolved. Then the ice age began to edge down from the Arctic, and growth was stunted. The pasture fields were getting bare, and probably the monsters fought to survive. The old hothouse jungle was cooling off. No doubt the monsters felt the change, but they had almost no brain power."

"When the soft-bodied saurians felt the cold they sank to the oozy swamp bottoms. The flying pterodactyls folded their leather wings and clung to the underside of the fern treetops. Great masses of tender green food no longer shot out of the mud and growth became dry and woody."

"Then began the world's greatest battles for survival. The strong drove out the weak and then the giants struggled among themselves."

"In the cold morning light a stegosaurus chased a flapping moa along the bank of a gray lagoon. It had no hope of overtaking the moa, just ill-tempered from days of hunger. But in chasing the

moa he found a clump of green reeds. Only a few bites, but every bite counted in the strange new world of famine.

"Just as he began to crunch the sweet reeds, a brontosaurus rose from the bed of the lagoon, rearing its baleful head thirty feet above the water. Although tons heavier than the enemy, it had never before attacked a stegosaurus. It fought not only with its head, but with a long, lashing tail of lightning swiftness. But its great mass of flesh was unprotected; it had no armor plate anywhere.

"But the sweet scent of newly crushed reeds was irresistible. Its unbelievably small brain was incapable of reason. It launched swiftly upon the stegosaurus who watched every movement with small piglike eyes. The great tail of the water monster lashed out in fury upon its armored relative. The armor plates, set edgewise down the middle of the back, were hard and sharp. The flailing tail of the water dinosaur was almost severed across the cutting plate.

"The armored monster was bowled over by the mighty blow, but little injured. He rose instantly, turning sideways to his foe. The amphibian, badly cut, tried for a head blow. To each swift stroke the armored one responded with a vicious snap of four hundred double-edged teeth. To cut the tail of the amphibian would be more than half the battle. But the great tail was swift and its blows crushing. It seemed impossible to gain a hold on the twisting coils.

"Then a dimorphodon flapped slowly over the lagoon, discouraged and dull with hunger. It did not notice the struggling dinosaurs until almost upon them. Then with a hiss of anger it suddenly arose, flicking its whiplike tail out of danger. The end of the snapping tail caught the amphibian across the eye. Instantly the eye was sightless and the next attack upon the armored enemy was badly aimed.

"The bristling teeth at last sank into the amphibian's tail. At once it was severed and lay twitching in the mud. Unbalanced by the loss, quick escape to deep water was impossible. Instantly the armored one closed upon the other. The impenetrable plates

gave no vulnerable point of attack, while the slashing of the massive jaws brought down the great amphibian, struggling desperately to keep its head above the terror of the curved teeth. But foot by foot it was lowered to a dreadful end. Then the armored one began once more to crunch the sweet-scented reeds."

When he paused suddenly, Emma came back to the world of reality with a start. So vivid had been his picture of the age of monsters that she found herself clutching his arm. In swift confusion she drew away. He allowed a few moments of silence in which to adjust themselves to the present-day world. Then he smiled.

"Did I exhaust you completely? I hardly know when to stop once I really start."

"Oh, it was wonderful!" Emma sighed. "Dreadful—but wonderful!"

"Something to think about, anyway."

"When I'm walking around it won't be just the plowed fields I'll see. I'll be walking along the edge of lakes and through queer forests. I'll know that under my feet are the bones of wonderful animals. Oh, I won't be seeing just bare fields any more!" It was a long time since she had felt such an eagerness for knowledge.

"Life's pretty fine," Robert Faulkner said soberly. "If we know how to get the best out of it."

"But it's so easy to miss the best." Emma's voice was wistful. Then she roused herself. "My, how the time flies! They'll be coming in from the hayfield before I'm ready."

"And you'll need to have pasture ready for the monsters," Robert laughed.

"Yes, I will." Emma understood his whimsy. "I wouldn't want them to start fighting." Then she said seriously: "It's been splendid—this morning, I mean. I've never . . ." She said nothing more for fear she might say too much.

It was possible, by careful planning and swift work, to save a little time for the books Robert Faulkner had lent. Old habits of

study began to come back. Emma had never given any thought to the geologic ages of the earth; in fact she hardly knew such periods had existed. But the chance to learn had come, as it were, out of the blue sky. Learning from books, any books, had always been fascinating. Only the sad lack of time was a constant regret.

None of this small activity was deliberately concealed from Burl. If he saw anything unusual, he gave no sign. It was not likely that anything unrelated to the rush of the summer season would attract his notice. All farm wives within his circle of observation were faithful workers, devoted to the single purpose of a farm's welfare. It would never occur to him that they might harbor other thoughts far removed from the narrow limits of daily life. Emma did not feel disloyal. She made no conscious effort to conceal her new interest. No work was neglected.

Under Robert Faulkner's encouragement Emma learned rapidly. It was a pleasure to surprise him with the occasional use of a technical term. She began to understand a little of his work and the problems involved. Late in the summer he made his surprising suggestion:

"I'm not flattering when I say you could be good at this work. With little time you've absorbed a good deal. While you have no technical training, you really have the scientific spirit. That's something you can't get from books; either you have it or you haven't. What I'm trying to tell you in all this talk is that you'd make a good assistant."

"I think I'm a full-time assistant already." She thought only that he was kind and being complimentary.

"But I mean it seriously," he explained. "The museum needs several women assistants. There'll be plenty of assembling to do when the material comes in from all our crews. With my recommendation I think you could be appointed. You'd like it."

It was such a tremendous surprise that Emma could find no words. She sat staring intently at the fields as if looking at them for the last time. But she was not thinking of the fields. She saw the big rooms of the museum, a book-filled library, people busy

and interested in thrilling problems, and herself as one of those people. The sound of Robert Faulkner's voice dispelled the dream.

"Don't decide now," he urged. "It's too big for that. Just think about it. Keep turning it over and let it develop."

In the days that followed Emma could think of nothing else. She did her familiar work automatically. Almost from the beginning she rejected the offer. But it was wonderful to think about, to let her thoughts play with all the possibilities. She looked at pictures of the museum's big workrooms in one of the pamphlets Robert had lent her. In one of these high-windowed rooms she could see herself spending pleasant years, in a work she really cared about. Yes, it was wonderful to play with the chance of living again in a world she had missed. It was out of the question, of course, but retaining the dream made work less monotonous.

Robert did not talk of it directly. He was too fine and understanding to try undue influence. He had given her the chance, but he knew the decision must be hers. In fact he seemed to avoid the usual news about his work as if the case must rest on what had already been said.

A week came when she hardly saw him at all. It was a frenzied week when the threshing crew swarmed into the house three times a day like a horde of devouring locusts. Robert Faulkner's daily provisions were left on the plank where they had sat so often. But on Saturday machines and men moved on to another farm.

On Sunday Emma rested until noon. In the afternoon she began to come to herself as if reviving from a turbulent dream. It was hardly possible to realize that once again the year's crisis had passed.

On Monday morning before daylight Burl would leave to help a neighbor who had helped him. Days were noticeably shorter and the mornings were crisp with the promise of winter not far away.

For no reason which Emma could explain she almost dreaded meeting Robert. Seeing him for a few moments morning after

morning had not seemed especially significant. They had slipped into the routine so naturally that one morning was much like another. But after a week without a meeting, returning to a kind of tryst seemed to hold a special implication. They had proved by her week's absence that he could take his provisions without her presence. If she joined him again there could be no pretense of business. There was one reason only, but before it could become too devastatingly clear Emma put it away, reminding herself sharply that she was no longer a girl.

She saw him coming across the stubble fields. He would wait a few moments, then pick up his basket and return. There seemed to be something disappointed, even in his walk, on those mornings when he had to go away without a word. Or did she see significance where none existed? She feared to see him and decided to leave a farewell note in his basket along with the books he had lent her. Even while making her decision she put on a crisp dress and her Sunday shoes. Two personalities within her were struggling together.

Then Emma thought of the books. Of course they must be returned; several of them were valuable. This thought of the books might be only an excuse, but she gathered courage from it. How silly to tremble just because of going out to the henhouse! But she had to keep on going, because no doubt he was watching. She paused a moment before turning the corner to the plank seat where he waited. With determined sternness she reminded herself of Burl. Also, she was the mother of Tom and Fred, and she must not forget it, ever!

Briskly Emma stepped around the corner of the building. Later she understood how Robert must also have come around the corner at the same instant. But at the time she felt only the rather solid impact and an inclination to fall backward. She knew he pulled her upright. His arms were about her. Longer, much longer than necessary. Then for a moment his strong hands closed over hers. For an instant, or an eternity, they looked into each other's eyes. With a sigh that was almost a sob Emma made a little movement of withdrawal and he let her go.

He stepped back and thrust his hands into his pockets. In a husky voice he said:

"I was clumsy. I'm sorry." Then he said again: "I didn't mean to do it, but I'm not sorry."

He waited for Emma to speak, but her voice would not come. It was hard to keep her eyes from brimming. With understanding he said:

"I must go now. I know you want it that way. You're a wonderful person. I'll leave you two little poems I've been going to read to you. But I think I knew all the time I shouldn't. You're strong, and it's unfair of me to do anything to weaken your strength. I'll leave them for you." He put the sheet of paper through a crack in the boards as if resolved that he must not touch her again. "Don't read them until you've decided."

Once more he seemed to wait for some word from her, but Emma knew that with any attempt she must burst into tears. Then she heard his low voice go on:

"I understand. Don't try to talk. I'm leaving on the afternoon train tomorrow. We've been called in by the museum; the season is over. I'll bring your basket back tonight. I'll come in the morning. Leave a note in the basket if you've decided you can come to the museum, as I explained once. If there's no note . . ." She heard his voice falter an instant. "Well, I'll know what that means too."

Emma could not see for tears, but she heard him pick up the parcel of books where it had dropped as they bumped together. She heard him move away, then he paused a moment and his step came back:

"Good-by . . . Emma."

She heard his rapid steps as if he ran from her. When she knew he was really gone she snatched the paper from the crack and rushed to the house. She slammed the door of the bedroom and dropped on the bed. The long-withheld torrent burst from her with such strength that it seemed she could never be calm again.

Tom and Fred were at school. Burl would not come from his

labors until long after dark. The day seemed made for lonely grief. Vaguely she heard the kitchen clock strike the hours—hour after hour.

Then the boys came home and she heard their surprised calls. She made herself answer them, and they came rushing into the darkened bedroom.

"It's not bedtime, Maw!" Tom was confused that she was not in her accustomed place at the kitchen stove. Carefully she tried her voice:

"I've got a pain—a very bad pain. But I think it will be better—tomorrow."

"Gee, Maw! That's too bad!" Fred's small voice piped. "We're hungry."

"Get a piece of pie out of the cupboard," Emma directed.

When they had gone she roused herself. Small sons must not be neglected. When they raced off to the barn Emma gazed in the mirror. What a ravaged face! Perhaps cold-water cloths would help. The boys would not notice, but Burl might—if he had time.

Tom and Fred came in with the dark. Supper waited for them. They ate hugely, not noticing that she tasted nothing. Everything seemed normal again; they did not remember to ask about the pain which they had been told was very bad. It was both a relief and a regret that they had no memory for such things.

Burl came late. Those who labored with threshing crews always ate where they worked. There was no supper to be kept hot for him. If breakfast could be left almost ready, she would ask him to get it himself. She could be almost asleep when he came; he need not really see her for at least a night and another day.

When he came in Emma murmured as if close to sleep: "I've got an ache. If you'll get your breakfast I won't get up in the morning. It's all on the table, anyway."

"Sure," Burl agreed. "Don't worry." At once he sank into the heavy sleep of a long day.

But there was no sleep for Emma. Although she assured herself that her decision had been made, and in fact had always been made, yet it did not seem to stay that way. Conscience and inclination maintained a ceaseless struggle. Once only congenial work had tempted her. Now the temptation was twofold. Tomorrow, only tomorrow morning, was the dead line for action. Again and again Emma rehearsed every moment of their last meeting. When she felt his arms about her and heard again his low voice filled with emotion, her will reached a low ebb. How he had said: "You're a wonderful person!" And he had believed it! His last words: "Good-by . . . Emma." Yes, she must go! Surely they had not met just to end everything in frustration! There was still time for the note in the basket.

Emma slipped from the bed and lighted the lamp. There was no fear of disturbing Burl. Nothing could waken him until his proper time. Somehow it felt more comfortable to move about; motion seemed more in keeping with the turmoil of her mind. Mentally she began to compose the note, very brief, but he could read between the lines. Perhaps with the note safely in the basket she could force herself to sleep. One sentence would be enough. Just: "Dear Robert—Dearest Robert: I'll come; will arrange everything as soon as possible. Yours, Emma." Yes, that was enough. She wrote the words and folded the paper.

Obeying an old impulse to look at Tom and Fred at least once in the silence of the night, Emma entered their room. They would not easily waken, but from custom her hand shaded the light from their eyes. She gazed at them a long time. These were her babies. Tom had been born in a sod stable with oxen the night of the big fire. She had fought for the life of little Fred through a long and terrible winter of fever. Yes, they were babies still, depending on her for all their wants, running to her with every problem. How frightened and lonely they would be without her; perhaps neglected by some careless housekeeper! Burl could fend for himself, but not these two. She could not fail them. Her conscience would allow her no happiness if she deserted her helpless brood. Emma put the lamp on a stand and in a rush of

tenderness threw her arms about the boys. They began to stir a little. Grasping the lamp, she tiptoed from the room.

This time she must be strong enough to stay with her decision. She lit a match and burned the note to Robert on the stove top. At the moment she felt strong, but she feared the recurrent periods of weakness. Bed was impossible. She could not endure the inaction of lying quiet for hour after hour. Then a solution flashed on her. She would walk so far that no return could be made before Robert had come and gone. Then, if her resolution wavered as morning came, leaving a note would be physically impossible.

With swift impulse she left a scrawl for Burl: "Have gone to Elsa's for medicine. Back soon." She propped the note against the teakettle. When Burl read it he would remember she had complained about some ache or pain. He would not be alarmed.

The night was cold with a fitful wind and a promise of snow in the air. She must walk as far as the old Phinney place. From that point return would be impossible until Robert had gone. In her mind there was no place left for fear. Sudden sounds and eerie shadows beside the long night trail were swept aside by the conflict of thoughts. Walking—swift walking—must in time bring exhaustion and sleep.

Past the silent farmyard of the Beeman place and on, always on and on, to the Phalens', where Levi's dog came out to bark with a great threat until it recognized her. With a tremendous effort Emma avoided coherent thought. Only a confusion of Robert and Burl, of Tom and Fred and Robert again, seethed and bubbled like something that boiled hard in a kettle. Definite plans could not be formulated if thoughts were kept disordered, and it was the swift plan that Emma feared.

When a gray light began to grow in the east it was time to turn back. A swing to the south, then a little east, and the Schaffer barns would stand up in the gloom. Emma forced her protesting feet over the uneven trail. If only she could reach the Schaffers'! It would be bad to collapse and be found by some farmer clattering past to his early work.

When Emma pushed open the Schaffer door Elsa still sat at the breakfast table. Herman had gone and Elsa was alone.

"Whatever it is!" Elsa started up in alarm.

"I'll tell you—sometime." Emma spoke in a half whisper. "Just let me rest."

"Sure! Sure!" Elsa bustled about. "Rest all day! Rest a lot of days." She poured a cup of steaming tea.

"You're a comfort, Elsa." There was a feeling of friendship even in tea.

"Now I get you whatever," Elsa offered. "Some kinds of oil, maybe; herbs, anything."

"Nothing!" Emma shook her head. "I'm not sick—not that way."

"Come to the bed, then," Elsa urged. Sympathy seemed to radiate from her ample bulk.

"If I could!" Emma murmured gratefully. Elsa was understanding; she asked no questions. Emma felt herself being tucked in like a child. She heard the bedroom door close. Here was a sanctuary as long as she liked.

When Emma came into the Schaffer kitchen again, time was her first anxiety:

"I hope it's ten or later." She looked about for a clock.

"After twelve, even," Elsa smiled. "I hope you had rest."

"If it's after ten, nothing else matters." Robert had come and gone.

"You look awful thin and kind of wore out." Elsa regarded her shrewdly. "Maybe there should be more eating." She began to put dishes on the table, and tea steamed on the stove.

"It is a long time," Emma remembered wonderingly. Eating had been a very minor matter.

"Try dumpling with chickens," Elsa urged. "New headcheese we have with sauerkraut, even."

"I'll try and nibble a little." Emma could not altogether refuse Elsa's overflowing hospitality.

They sat in an understanding silence until Elsa said, "When days go by and weeks and months, you be better."

"Yes," Emma agreed slowly. "Yes, I hope that's the way it will be." She wondered at the other's insight until Elsa said:

"I know how it goes. This morning I see him come and then he walks away slow. Every morning I see him come all summer. Once when I was young too . . ." Then she stopped abruptly. "Yes, I know how it goes."

"You're right, Elsa," Emma admitted. "That's what it is. I shouldn't have let him keep on coming. But I did, even when I knew." She wept on Elsa's broad shoulder. The clock ticked on, and the two women who had kept faith sat together.

"Yes, we know. We know," Elsa repeated with motherly pats on Emma's thin arm. "Maybe I think every woman know."

In the afternoon Emma said: "I must go now. I must be home before the boys come from school. I left their lunch tied up ready last night, but they'll be hungry again."

"Maybe small boys is a good thing," Elsa said thoughtfully. "And come any time. It is so close to us, you can come plenty."

"Oh, I will!" Emma grasped her hands. "I couldn't have got through without you."

At home the house was silent until Tom and Fred came clamoring for food. They rushed away to burrow in the new strawstacks behind the big maples.

As the hands of the clock reached for five Emma went into the yard. She admitted it was very foolish. Inside with the door shut would have been much more sensible. She stood in the raw air, listening, until the distant whistle of the eastbound train came through the twilight. The whistle had a hollow, mournful voice, three notes of dirgelike sound. On the far horizon there might be a smudge of smoke, but in the dusk Emma could not find it.

She turned to the silent house. On her coat sleeve she saw a speck of white and then another. Snowflakes, the first of the year! For months they would fall and fall until the vast flat fields were buried deep. But tonight the snowflakes seemed to be falling into an open grave.

In the bedroom with the lamp lighted Emma unfolded Rob-

ert's poems. He had said not to read them until he was gone. But now he was gone—gone forever!

He had cut two poems from some magazine and pasted one on each side of a sheet. Slowly Emma began reading:

*There's fun in whatever we do!
We two!
That's the way I knew it was you!
We may work or play,
But still, some way,
We find ourselves laughing together, gay.
There's fun in whatever we do,
We two!
Your danger and mine
We should know by this sign;
That whether the pastime be old or new,
There's fun in whatever we do,
We two!*

Although he had not written the words himself, it was so exactly true, it was more like a letter from him than a printed poem. The only letter she would ever have! So he had felt that way too! The eager interest in all they had discussed, the quick understanding of each other's moods, and how easy it had been to laugh! There had been no need of anyone else. It was exactly as the poem repeated: "We two! We two!"

On the other side Emma read:

*I like air castles, but I'd much
Prefer a bungalow—
A real one, with three hollyhocks,
Or seven in a row;

And it must have a kitchen sink
And it must have a swing,
A bright canary in a cage
That truly likes to sing.*

*A kitten and a window box
A fireplace, and—what more?
Why, nothing else, I think, but you
Standing at the door.*

Yes, he had cared, very greatly cared. This was his own happy way of telling her. Always she could remember that their feeling had been mutual.

Sensibly, the poems should be destroyed. There could be no gain in opening an old wound. But they seemed so much a part of him, Emma could not do it. Swiftly she stored them in the bottom of her one trunk. Someday she might be strong enough to hold a match to Robert's poems. But not now.

Tom and Fred banged in with loud demands. Perhaps, as Elsa said, boys were a good thing. And work was a good thing. Any distraction was welcome.

When the boys had gone to bed Emma stepped out the back door to listen. Flakes dropped in a long slant across the path of light from the door. Of course there could be no train whistle at this hour! It was a foolish impulse. There was no whistle, only the crunch of Burl's wagon wheels on the hard, new snow.

Israel Bower, the old postmaster, told Emma about the finding of the Indian squaw.

"Here's your mail, Mrs. Zither, and did you hear about old Windflower?"

"No, I don't know that name." Emma paused a moment.

"Don't know as that was rightly her name, either," Israel admitted. "I just give her the name myself. Indians have names like that—Windflower, or White Blossom, or Sun-in-the-Face, or some such. Up north a few miles there's some poor land not settled much. When the snow melted this spring some new settlers found her."

"She might have got lost in a storm," Emma suggested.

"Could have," Israel agreed. "But I don't think it was that

way. Indians don't get lost very easy. I think she was left." He paused to let Emma feel the significance of his words.

"Who would leave her?" Emma asked. "Why would anybody do that?"

"Used to be quite a custom years ago," Israel explained. "Some tribes did and some didn't. I traded with lots of Indians in the early days. Maybe I got used to the idea, but it seems a mite hard to folks who hear about it for the first time. When old Indians can't keep up they just natch'ly got to drop out."

"And be left to freeze!" Emma could hardly believe such harshness possible.

"Could be," Israel said. "If it happened in winter."

"I didn't know Indians were like that," Emma said doubtfully.

"They're kind of practical, that's all," Israel defended. "If the tribe hustle to shelter before a blizzard strikes, they gotta get there. If they waited to help some old squaw, all the rest of 'em might be in danger. They just figger the life of the tribe is worth more than one feeble old critter who wouldn't last long anyways."

"Perhaps it's practical," Emma admitted, "but it's hardhearted just the same." She went out into the cold spring wind.

All the way home over the soggy trail Emma could not free herself from the depression of old Israel's story. This Windflower, as he had called her, must once have been a happy girl. Perhaps her dreams of romance were fulfilled by marriage with a young warrior. With the years, no doubt, she became a mother, and in time a grandmother. As her strength decreased she must become of less and less value to the tribe, probably more neglected at the feasts and around the campfires. When she became a burden with her increasing years perhaps she was hardly tolerated.

What had happened on that last march across the plains? As the blizzard gathered strength the band no doubt pressed on toward their shelter in the hills. This Windflower, very wrinkled and very frail, tried at first to keep up with the line of march. Again and again she fell in the deep snow, each time

struggling to her feet. Finally Windflower became last in the line. When she stumbled and could not rise again, a terrible fear must have seized her. Perhaps for a time she crawled on her hands and knees in a desperate attempt to reach the others. But her age was too great and her strength all gone. She sank into the snow and did not move again. What did she think about when she knew the others had left her to perish? Were her thoughts bitter, that she who had poured out the strength of her years for the welfare of the tribe should be thus deserted?

Emma tried to shake herself free of the tragedy. She had often noticed very old squaws with wrinkled, leathery faces, selling their baskets on the street corners. She had never given them much thought, supposing vaguely they were satisfied with their primitive existence. Now it seemed that tragedy came into the lives of all women—of all pioneer women. It was the way of life.

I2

AS TOM AND FRED became a little older, Burl imposed various farm tasks upon them. They were good boys and probably as industrious as other boys of their age. But Burl was so anxious to have them grow up, to have them take their places as prosperous young farmers, that he seemed to impress work upon them before their time. Although he did not say so, Emma felt that he almost regretted their time at school. School was an interlude that kept them a little longer from starting on their great life-work as farmers.

The boys sometimes resented their tasks. It was natural that they should bring their troubles to Emma. They seemed to look on a mother as a kind of shield or interceder between themselves and a stern father.

"Sure, we should work some," Tom complained. "But not all

the time. Harry and Scud and Brick an' everybody went to the river. We gotta weed turnips." He was scornful of the turnips which held him from roaming the river flats.

"Maybe you can go next Saturday," Emma tried to placate. "If you get the turnips all done."

"Aw, there'll be something else!" Tom remembered former experiences.

"I'll speak to your father," she promised. But they left only half convinced that her influence would help them.

It was difficult to be the intermediary between father and sons. Emma wanted her boys to be happy, and yet she must not seem to interfere with Burl's plans.

"The boys want to play ball Saturday," she explained to Burl. "Just in the afternoon."

"We got hay to rake," Burl remembered. "Maybe we'll get done early."

But farm work was not often finished early. It seemed never to be finished at all. The boys were resentful of their disappointments. Emma tried a general discussion with Burl.

"They're so young yet!" she pointed out.

"But I worked," Burl remembered. He described the long hours he had labored on his father's farm. "It didn't hurt me any. It got me started in good habits."

"They'll have such a long time to work," Emma urged. "All the years after they leave school. They can't ever be young again."

"That's when they learn habits," he argued. "When they're young. Anyway, all the time they work for themselves. Someday it all belongs to them."

"I know, Burl. I can see how you feel. But young boys can't see ahead like that. What they do Saturday afternoons means more right now than some land they'll have in twenty or thirty years."

"That's because they haven't come into their sense yet. But they'll thank me someday."

Emma felt a premonitory doubt that they would ever thank

him, but she could say no more. It was not that Burl needed the value of their small work. The farm had prospered and he could well afford to hire help. But he had a fixed idea of the disciplinary value of work. He remembered his own youth. He believed that his work-filled years accounted for whatever good qualities he possessed as a man.

Long ago Emma had given up her dream of music. Or perhaps she might have painted a little or written a story or a play. But it seemed that in a single lifetime only one kind of work could be well done. Somehow she had become a wife and mother. Perhaps such a task should fill the expectation of life. Although her early dreams were abandoned, they were never quite forgotten.

One hot July day Elsa Schaffer drove into the shade of the Zither barn on her way from town.

"I got to get me a little cool. Just a few minutes, even." She mopped her shining face.

"Come in and sit awhile," Emma urged. "It's early yet."

"Only a minute I sit here," Elsa explained. "Herman waits for the mowing-machine wheel I bring."

They looked across the sun-drenched fields. Heat waves shimmered, distorting the even line of the horizon. Far away they saw Burl tossing hay with a fork.

"Your man don't care if it's hot sun," Elsa laughed.

"No, he likes the heat," Emma explained. "I always feel wilted days like this, but he'd like to have it hot all the time."

"He should maybe live in a hot country," Elsa dried her face again. "And warm countries remember me I think we go someplace, come winter."

"You mean to a warm country, Elsa?"

"Warm only so it is nice in winter, even. Maybe we go by Florida, maybe by California." She was excited by the magnitude of her secret. "Nobody we tell yet, only you."

"Well, that's wonderful, Elsa. You'll have a grand time."

"A time like a honeymoon, Herman says. We don't get by Niagara Falls when we marry. Now we think for sure it is Florida."

"No blizzards, Elsa, not even snow," Emma remembered. "You'll have a fine rest."

"Cottages with palm trees around even, Herman says. But I get on now and take him the little wheel." She made a clicking sound and the horse moved into the sun.

Out of her talk with Elsa grew the great idea. Why not Florida for the Zither family? The subject must be approached with care. Once, in an exuberant moment, Burl had promised they would go places. But he did not have those moments any longer. Responsibilities and fatherhood, and perhaps even his success, had made him a little stern and pompous. He did not shout out suddenly as he did in the early days. He seemed weighed down with care and dignity.

His mind was too practical to care about music and pictures. Emma could never imagine him reading poems. But a trip might appeal to him. Perhaps if he could be shown how fine such an experience would be for Tom and Fred, he might consent. He thought everything of his sons. He was strict with them, but only because he was sure that strictness was best. She approached the plan from the boys' angle:

"Elsa came in a few minutes last week. She and Herman have decided to go South this winter."

"South! How far south?" Burl's tone was doubtful.

"Why, as far as they can go. Florida, Elsa said."

"Florida! Herman going to Florida! I can hardly see him spend so much."

"It might not be so much," Emma suggested hopefully.

"Any place so far away must be," Burl asserted.

"Maybe anyone so successful as Herman could go anyway," Emma said subtly.

"He's not so successful." Burl blundered into the trap. "No more than Heck or Sam or us. Not as much, even."

"Oh, he must be," Emma said innocently. "Elsa says they're going to rent a cottage with a lot of palm trees. Nobody else around here could do that."

"Why couldn't they?" Burl's voice was aggressive. "Sam could do it. We could do it."

"I'm so glad!" She heaved a sigh of relief. "It'll be so good for the boys. A trip like that is worth a year of school. They can see things instead of read about them. I know because I taught school. Then they can stop school and start to work a year sooner."

"Say, how much does this business cost?" Burl began bristling, wondering just how he had committed himself.

"Elsa didn't say how much." Emma made her voice careless. "I guess whatever it was didn't matter much to the Schaffers."

"It matters!" Burl almost shouted in his old-time way. "Only Herman has gone off his head somehow." He hurried out, so that he might consider the situation by himself.

Perhaps a week later, when Burl came in to dinner, Emma was holding against herself an odd-looking little garment.

"What's that thing?" Burl was not really interested, but he asked anyway.

"It's a bathing suit for Tom," Emma explained. "I've made one for Fred just like it."

"When did boys start putting on clothes to have a bath?" He still did not understand.

"It's like this." Emma spread out a travel folder. "Elsa lent it to me." She pointed to a palm-bordered beach where hundreds of adults and children sprawled on the white sand. "See, they all have bathing suits."

"I guess they'd have to," Burl agreed hastily.

Emma put away the folder. The hired men came in and dinner began.

One day when the boys were at school Elsa Schaffer came just before Burl had gone out for the afternoon.

"It's a new little book somebody sent us." She handed the pamphlet to Burl. "I couldn't wait so you could see."

"What's it about?" Emma urged her on.

"It tells all the places and whatever we see on the way. Always is it nice on a train so families know each other."

"I'll show you the bathing suits, Elsa." The women went into the bedroom together, leaving the travel folder with Burl.

One night when the boys had gone to bed Burl asked:

"Do they know about this yet?"

"Not yet." She knew without asking that he meant the trip. "I thought it would be nicer if you told them. All their lives they'd remember how their father gave them this wonderful thing. Always they'd talk about it and tell everybody."

Burl pondered for a time before he asked: "You think they'd learn a lot? I mean would they pick up learning faster than in school?"

Emma tried to keep the joy of victory from her voice: "Oh, I'm sure they would! All the books on teaching say travel is the best way to learn. Just think, our boys have never been on a train or a boat. They've never seen a big town or city. What do they really know about an ocean or a forest or mountains? They're just two little prairie boys who've never been ten miles from home. They'll be a lot smarter when they get out in the world if they know something about it first." She ended her long argument, almost fearful she had said too much.

"I guess they don't know much," he admitted slowly. "Maybe I don't either." Then he added with his old assertion: "But I get along."

"You tell them," Emma urged, anxious to put the matter beyond recall. "Tell them now. Half the fun of a trip is thinking about it. They'll talk about it all the time."

At noon on Saturday Tom and Fred rushed in shouting, each trying to be the first to tell her:

"Maw! Maw! We're goin' someplace!"

"Why, where is it?" She rejoiced in their happiness.

"It's where they have oceans and trees."

"And wade in the water."

"Even in the winter!"

"Only there won't be any winter."

"Big towns. Bigger'n ours."

"How can we sleep on the train if it moves all the time?"

"Can we climb trees too?"

"Pop says maybe we can pick oranges."

"Will the people talk like us, Maw?"

"Can we see black boys—black just like a stove?"

There was no end to their tremendous outburst. After supper Emma whispered to Burl:

"Give 'em these." She slipped the travel folders into his hand.

All evening the boys pored over the pictures. They pointed out little bays where they would wade and the trees they selected for climbing. When at last they were compelled to go to bed they put the folders under their pillows.

In their excitement they noticed nothing peculiar when they were shown their bathing suits the next day. Apparently their mother was a marvelous person who could make such things in almost no time at all.

They were so insistent it was impossible to deny them when they begged to wear the suits. Without experience, no one thought of the result. At the end of the second day their backs and shoulders were red and raw with sunburn. They moaned and wriggled and cried out in sudden pain when melted tallow was applied to the flaming areas. When they went to bed they lay uncomfortably on their faces.

"Well, they've learned something already," Burl said when Emma came from the bedroom. "They wouldn't read it in books, either."

"I'm awfully sorry. I should have known," Emma admitted. "I never had a bathing suit, but I've read in magazines about sunburn. They should have tried just about an hour at a time."

"They won't forget it soon," Burl said. "When you tell 'em something they forget almost before you get through. Maybe experience is best, if it doesn't do any real harm."

"They'll be all right in a few days," Emma assured him.

When the boys began to peel they were excited all over again. The soreness had gone.

"See, I can skin myself and it doesn't hurt." Tom pulled a bit

of white dead substance from his shoulder. "Look, Maw! Isn't that a big piece?"

It was a great season for work. Burl capitalized on the forthcoming trip. He spurred the boys to become prodigies of energy. They were constantly reminding each other: "Pop says we gotta hoe all the taters so we can go." "Maw, we give pigweeds to the pigs every day, so they'll grow big and we can go."

Emma sometimes feared they were doing too much. Fred was still small. She spoke to Burl, but he brushed aside her fears.

"Whoever heard of boys working too hard?"

"But their work really doesn't count for much."

"I know. But it isn't that. It's giving 'em the idea they're helping to earn this trip. They'll get more out of it that way." He still upheld his old idea of work and discipline.

To offset the expenses of the trip Burl had bought sixty half-grown pigs. The animals were fed and fattened all summer; they would be sold when the weather turned cold.

In November Burl came bursting into the house. "Those new folks north of us want to quit. I got to see Israel right away." He leaped on the pony and galloped out of the yard.

He came home at dark. Emma asked:

"What is it, Burl? Do those people owe you anything?"

"No, no! It's not that. But they're pulling out. Going back East someplace. You see what that means?"

But still Emma did not see. Burl looked at her in amazement.

"Why, their land's for sale!"

"Of course, if they're leaving." It seemed a strange thing to make such a fuss about.

"I'll tell you, then." Burl was a shade impatient that she could not grasp what was so obvious to him. "We have no land for Fred. It was all gone when he came along. This is the first farm there's been for sale in years. It's so close, too."

So that was it! Emma said slowly: "But, Burl, will he want it?"

"Sure he'll want it! What else could he want?"

"Lots of things. Maybe you ought to ask him."

"How could a child know what he wants?"

"But you didn't want any part of your father's land. You wanted to start out and find a place for yourself."

"It's different now." He tried to be patient, as if explaining to a child. "There isn't any more new West, like when I was young. It's all settled now—everywhere. Fred couldn't get a homestead, no matter where he tried. By the time he's old enough the land'll be so high we couldn't buy it for him, either. You see now, Emma?"

"I guess it's all right." She agreed to his long argument, but added: "If he wants it." Burl did not reply, evidently thinking this last point beyond any need of discussion.

Every day he rode into town to consult with Israel Bower, the postmaster. Israel was also a J.P., a moneylender, a notary public, and a semi-lawyer. He looked after the farmers' business for miles around.

"Israel don't get anywhere," Burl explained finally. "He thinks I should go to the city. Those folks on the farm didn't rightly own it, then they quit; the title reverted to some company in the city. Seems like it's a hard thing to straighten out by letters."

Emma was opposed to more land, but she said mildly: "Whatever you think, Burl."

Almost at the moment he left, disaster struck the Zither farm. Noah Barger, the old hired man, announced:

"The pigs is sick, ma'am. A lot of 'em. Cholera, I guess."

"Can't you do something, Noah?" Emma urged.

"I don't know anything," Noah admitted. "I guess nobody knows anything."

When the mortality became alarming, Emma insisted on an expert from town. But the local veterinary shook his head.

"Can't do anything now, Mrs. Zither. Hog cholera spreads mighty fast and there's a lot of it goin' round."

"But there must be something," Emma insisted. "Experts must have found something to do."

"Sure we have!" The man's pride was touched. "If you'd called me a week or two ago I could have vaccinated the lot."

In a few days Burl was home. His first words concerned the land:

"It's all right. Everything's straight. We all got land now." He put some folded papers in a tin box. "I'll put these in Israel's safe. He wasn't up yet." He regarded Emma's sober face. "What's the matter? You're still against the land; I guess that's it."

"Oh, Burl, it isn't the land! It's the pigs."

"Pigs? Did they get loose?"

"They got cholera. I had the man out from town. I didn't know anything more to do."

Burl rushed away. When he came in at noon he was silent and depressed.

"All gone; can't save one." He flung his cap in the corner.

There was nothing Emma could say to make the loss less grievous. No words could change the hard fact of a total loss. Later in the day Burl said partly to himself:

"I hadn't paid for 'em, either. I promised to pay when I sold 'em." He began making figures on the edge of a newspaper. "Seems like somebody just took six or eight hundred right out o' my pocket." He turned the paper and made more laborious figures. "Big payments on the new place, too. Mighty stiff payments." He lost himself in a maze of unhappy calculations.

For days he went about with hardly a word for anyone. Burying the animals on which he had counted so greatly must have been a depressing task. Emma tried to keep the boys from breaking into their father's abstraction. At last she offered, almost timidly:

"Is there something we can do? Any way we can make up?"

"I been turning over everything in my mind." He seemed relieved to talk over his problem. "Turning and twisting and puzzling and working out schemes. There's nothing very easy."

"Whether it's easy or not, will it work?" She was not able to give advice, but talking it over might help Burl to straighten out the plan in his own mind.

"Cows, I was thinking of. I got a lot of hay and straw and

oats that was too green to thresh, and there's tons of turnips. Yes, maybe it should be cows." He went on with his monologue, detailing the favorable and unfavorable points of his project.

"There'd be a lot o' buttermaking," he explained doubtfully.

"I'm willing, Burl," Emma managed to say. A wife was not a wife who did not stand by her husband in adversity. She remembered a promise that had always been solemn to her: "In sickness and in health; for richer, for poorer." Anybody could take the good times. The real test came when things were not so good. Yes, she must stick; she must take her share of whatever came. Shirking, with a guilty conscience, could not bring happiness anywhere.

Burl scoured the country, gathering an animal here, another there. He brought another hired man from town. There seemed to be milk everywhere; crocks and cans of cream, churning at all hours; working and packing pounds of butter.

Emma wondered a little about Florida. Burl had not discussed it at all. Perhaps he felt that the thing had solved itself without the need of words. He would not like to bring disappointment to them, and so, no doubt, he had just let it drift, believing that she would understand.

For a time Emma clung to the chance that once Burl had the butter and cream business running properly, he might still decide to go. That would mean hiring at least two more people. Reliable help was hard to find. Even the few days he had gone to the city had been disastrous.

When the boys began to clamor Emma explained: "I don't know for sure about Florida, and don't say anything to your father; he's worried."

"But, Maw, we worked all summer!" Tom protested.

"We all worked," she told them, trying to keep her voice from breaking. "Nobody could help it if the pigs died, could they?"

"No—I guess not," Fred admitted slowly. "But Pop promised."

"He couldn't know about the pigs." She tried to make them understand. "It was an accident and not anybody's fault. Perhaps next year——"

But a wail of protest arose: "Aw, that's too far!"

"Next year! It's always next year!" They went out, silent and downcast.

How true it was what Tom had said! On a prairie farm it was always next year. That was the hope, the philosophy by which the people kept themselves going from year to year, from generation to generation. Perhaps far on, in a day she would not see, the prairie would come into its own. Not always the land of tomorrow, but of today.

Telling Elsa was a hard experience.

"You mean not any time?" Elsa gasped. "Not later, even?"

"I'm really sure we can't. Burl hasn't said, but I know anyway."

"We counted so much," Elsa mourned. "It won't be the same, even for us."

"I must stay with the cows." Emma tried to subdue any sound of bitterness. "I guess that's my place this year."

"Aw, all the nice palm trees and sea water with sand!" Elsa wiped her eyes. "But if you got to have cows, we could lend what Herman's brother was coming to look after."

The next day Burl brought home the six Schaffer cows. As Emma saw them filing into the yard it was a bitter thought that she must be milkmaid to these animals while their owners rested on the warm sands of Florida.

The Schaffers left, and the winter settled into its long siege. Burl had two men who worked in the winter season for little more than their board. But it was Emma who cooked for the household of six. It was Emma who washed and mended, ironed and darned. It was Emma who washed the vast array of pails and pans and separator parts that were used in the dairy business. And Emma worked and salted the butter, packing it in crocks or making it into rolls wrapped in clean cheesecloth. It was an early and late business, and the cows could not be neglected at all.

In spite of her decision to be a good dutiful wife in any adversity that might befall them, it was only human that Emma

should have her bitter moments. When blizzards roared about the house she thought of the warm seas and white beaches that might have been theirs for the winter. When the men came into the house, bringing an almost overpowering stable odor, Emma had her times of silent resentment against Burl. But for his stubbornness in grabbing land he did not need, they might all have been with Elsa and Herman.

Perhaps it was hardest of all to look at the post cards Elsa sent in an envelope. When Burl brought the envelope from town he put it on the table and went out without comment. Of course he would not feel like talking about the great disappointment for which he was at least partly responsible. But it might have been easier if he had been able to find a few words of regret.

Burl bought each boy a bright-painted sleigh and an air rifle. He left the things with her.

"Tell 'em they are good boys." He was embarrassed at any approach toward sentiment. He departed for the barn before Emma could say a word. It was strange how this feeling for his sons kept him from becoming genial with them. He had adopted the role of stern parent that he might keep them to the mark, almost like a general with his men. He seemed to feel that a display of kindness or hilarity would be interpreted as a sign of weakness of which the boys might sometime take advantage.

Tom and Fred received their unusual gifts with amazement. They regarded them as adequate compensation for their disappointment. These things were immediate. They possessed them now, whereas the Florida trip had been only a promise for the dim future. The young were like that, Emma thought wistfully, but later their illusions vanished. Or perhaps youth had the right outlook and then with the years came the distorted view. It was hard to know.

One Sunday, after the church service was finished, Burl and the other men of the management committee retired to a little room in the rear for a brief meeting. Tom and Fred went out to walk up and down the street, but Emma waited in a seat near the door. Mrs. Rose Lee was also waiting for Andrew Lee.

Mrs. Lee had never been very friendly, but now she sat down in the same seat with Emma. She was an acidulous woman whose face Tom had said was exactly like a hen. She began now:

"I been waiting a long time for a chance to see you, Mrs. Zither. I mean, see you alone." She lowered her voice to a tone of confidence. "And all the time I been a-wonderin' if it's my Christian duty to tell you or not to tell."

Emma was sure from her suppressed eagerness that Mrs. Lee had decided definitely that it was her duty to talk. "We're both here, Mrs. Lee. If you think it's important."

"I'd say it was important if it happened to Andrew." She was hurt that anyone could doubt the importance of what she had to say. "Your man went to the city, didn't he, on the fourth of November?"

"Burl went to the city several months ago. I don't remember just when."

"I remember because it was my birthday and me and Andrew was there on the same day."

"Burl was away several days. Two or three, maybe four."

"The main point is that he was in the city overnight."

"Why, of course!" Emma was becoming impatient with the other's questioning. "Two nights, perhaps. I think he was on the train one night. He told me about sleeping in his seat, or maybe it was that he couldn't sleep."

"And, of course, he didn't tell you all about the other night?" Mrs. Lee was approaching her climax with eagerness.

Emma stood up. "Whatever you want to say, Mrs. Lee, you should hurry. The men will be out soon."

"As you seem to be kind of careless, I'll tell you. Me and Andrew was walking along the street lookin' in the windows. It was a bit late, when all of a sudden I said to Andrew: 'There's Burl Zither from home.' Andrew said it couldn't be, but I was sure. Just as we went up to speak, a big flashy girl comes along and starts to talk. It was that Nellie Blake that left home three years ago. You'd never know the hussy now."

"Andrew wanted to go to our room, but I said no, it was my

Christian duty to see what happened to a church member alone in a big city. We followed along and they turned into a kind of side street and in a minute they both went into a door. I looked in the door when we passed, but all I saw was their feet disappearing at the top of a stairway. That's all I know, Mrs. Zither, or I'd tell you more."

"I'm sure you would," Emma said in a level voice. She must not show her emotion, which Mrs. Lee would describe in detail to other church women.

"I know what I'd do in your place," Mrs. Lee said grimly. "I'd do it for the sake of your innocent boys, even if you have no pride for yourself."

"Just what would you do?" Emma murmured. She felt she must say anything to keep from crying out.

"Why, I'd—I'd do my Christian duty," she said vaguely. "I'd cast evil out of the temple."

"I don't know what that means," Emma forced the words. Then out of her great need came a splendid inspiration: "You see, Burl told me all about his visit with Nellie Blake." It was the first lie she had ever told, but she told it without a quiver.

"Why didn't you say so?" Mrs. Lee's mouth snapped shut like a hawk's beak.

The men were coming from their meeting now, and the women moved apart. Emma heard the strange voices of the men. They spoke in the solemn tones they always used in a church. Burl and Israel had a last word on the street. Tom and Fred waited where the horses were tied. Once again they were on the way home, the boys squatting in the wide rear of the buckboard.

Emma sat in the front seat with Burl. He spoke of the meeting in the slightly pompous way which always clung to him while the church influence lasted. Before the day ended he would become normal once more. Emma's thoughts were too turbulent to follow Burl's talk about the meeting. She knew he was explaining just what he had said and what Israel said and Andrew and Sam. No doubt Burl had made a second speech during

which they all came to see things his way, as they did generally.

Emma was vaguely aware of the boys whistling as they rode along behind. She heard Burl say sternly:

"Boys! Remember the Sabbath day!" The whistling stopped suddenly.

Her thoughts were whirling and spinning without any sense or order. She remembered a queer glass ornament on the parlor table when she was a small child at home. It was called a kaleidoscope. Whenever it was lifted from the table a mass of small colored particles whirled about in a swift, meaningless jumble. Her thoughts were like the old kaleidoscope, just a mass without meaning.

Usually when Burl explained the details of a church meeting and how exactly right he had been about this thing and that, she made little clucking sounds of approval. He must have missed this accompaniment of agreement. He was asking her, probably for the second time:

"What's the matter, Emma? Don't you feel so good?"

She was able to shake her head and cover her eyes with her hands as she did when her head ached.

"Too bad," he said regretfully. "I guess you haven't heard a thing I said. Well, we'll hurry home."

He urged the horses to a faster pace. There were subdued sounds of the boys laughing and scuffling in the back and Burl's stern warning: "Boys! The Sabbath!"

After that only the rhythmic beat of the horses' hoofs broke the calm of the sacred day.

Usually on a Sunday Burl helped her ceremoniously to alight from the buckboard. As he prepared for the weekly rite Emma sprang down on the other side. No doubt he would be hurt at this spurning of his gallantry, but at the moment she could not bear his touch. She found refuge in the bedroom, where she could think in peace—if she could think at all.

She must have fallen asleep as soon as she threw herself on the bed. When she opened her eyes it was evening and the room was filled with shadows. Perhaps Burl had come in to

look at her. If he came again, she must keep her eyes closed.

Over and over again she was conscious of telling herself: "I must be sensible! I must be sensible!" But what did it mean to be sensible? Did it mean that she should accuse Burl and demand some redress for her grievance? But what could he do? What could anyone do now?

She had never known anyone confronted with such a situation. If there had been other wives with similar problems they had kept their troubles to themselves. In high-school days there had been stories in magazines of wronged wives. The stories told of dramatic scenes and accusations. Usually the couples had separated, but just how this was brought about the writers remained vague. No woman of Emma's acquaintance had ever separated from her husband.

Emma tried to remember what Mrs. Lee had said about doing something for her innocent sons. But she could not recall just what it was. What could be done, in any case, that would help Tom and Fred? Whatever Burl had done was in November, and now it was April. In all that time he had seemed just the same. Nothing had been different; it was only knowing that made the difference.

Perhaps Rose Lee had been mistaken. Perhaps she saw someone who looked like Burl. Even if Mrs. Lee was not mistaken, Burl's visit might still be without significance. Just a chance call on someone he had known before his marriage. But Rose had said the girl was flashy and a hussy. Why had Burl not mentioned the girl if he had nothing to conceal? He was not much of a hand for small talk these last few years. He might consider it beneath his dignity to repeat a conversation with a girl. He paid little attention to the young people around town, hardly knowing them by sight. But this was a big girl, Rose said. Big and attractive.

Emma tried to stop the endless round of her thoughts. It was like a debate with herself—an alternate arguing that Burl was guilty or that he was not. All the evidence, summed up again and again, left the verdict still uncertain.

Why not ask him? If he were innocent, he would never forgive her suspicion. If guilty, then the thing would be a barrier between them forever. Better not to know, then she could cherish whatever flame of hope could be kept alive.

Sometimes the exactness of Mrs. Lee's account overwhelmed her. There could be no purpose why any woman should invent such a story. It must be true! Why had Burl done this thing to her? After all her years of labor for him! Years of poverty and fever and sod houses—and this was how he repaid her! Of course she had lost nearly all of whatever attractiveness she might have possessed, but it had been lost working for him, bearing him sons, nursing him, washing his clothes, cooking his food, enduring the disappointments he had brought her. Self-pity swept her and she wept a long time into her pillow.

Emma was quiet again. It was impossible to go on like this indefinitely. The family must be faced. Delay meant only more explanations. There would be suggestions of a doctor, or having a hired girl in for a time. Such remedies could not be expedient. Instead of less work, more work. Work so that there would be less time to think. Hard work and utter weariness, so that there would be no time at all to think!

Suddenly she heard Burl's booming cry of "Boys!" She could see them curl up miserably on the old lounge, trying to find something new in the *Pilgrim's Progress* whose pages they had turned a hundred times. She must go out and see them. Get them food, wait on them. When Emma got up and lit the lamp she looked in the mirror. What a face! Even without its traces of tears, how could Burl find anything of interest in the face of that oldish little woman? No wonder he was attracted by a big, flashy girl! Emma's tears flowed again.

She sat down in despair. She could not face them like this, not without explanations, and explanations might lead to accusations. Her hand rested on the Bible. At other times of stress there had been help beyond her own strength. She lifted the Book with something of the old-fashioned faith that it might open at a place

ordained for her need. She began at the top of the right-hand page:

"He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her. And again he stooped down, and wrote on the ground. And they which heard it, being convicted by their own conscience, went out one by one, beginning at the eldest, even unto the last: and Jesus was left alone, and the woman standing in the midst. When Jesus had lifted up himself, and saw none but the woman, he said unto her, Woman, where are those thine accusers? hath no man condemned thee? She said, No man, Lord. And Jesus said unto her, Neither do I condemn thee: . . ."

Emma paused: "Neither do I condemn thee." Yes, that was it! That was the sign for which she looked. If one who never sinned did not condemn another, why should she? Condemning was such an easy thing, so full of little personal spites and revenge and self-righteousness. If Burl had done a wrong, even as the woman in the Bible story, the chances were very great that he would not repeat the offense. The woman had evidently been a habitual sinner, and yet she was not condemned. Emma repeated again and again:

"Neither do I condemn thee. Neither do I condemn thee."

It would not be easy. The temptation to condemn would well up many times. Perhaps as the days passed, or the months or the years, it would become possible to say from the heart: "Neither do I condemn thee."

13

ONE AFTERNOON near the end of the long winter Emma crossed the drifted fields to the Schaffers. Herman Schaffer often brought

out the mail for several families. This time he brought from town a strange story, a story which spread across the district with much speculation and shaking of heads. It was a small incident in itself, but it made exciting news at a time when any news was scarce.

North of town lived a family of Twillens, not one of the old homesteading families, but new people of some five or six years. Herman explained to Elsa and Emma:

"I see Jim Twillen a little, kind of quiet feller and don't talk so much. I think this thing happens to his wife maybe weeks, maybe months, and nobody knows it, even. I guess he thinks this wife he calls Jane might come back, so he don't say about it any."

"Where was it she goes?" Elsa urged. "And why she does it?"

"Nobody know." Herman shook his head sadly. "Not Jim Twillen, even hisself. But after a long time he says what he knows so maybe it might help to find her. Only it don't."

While Elsa cut out mittens for Herman from an old grain sack and Emma listened idly, Herman went on with his story. He explained how Jim Twillen was in the house with his family, stuffing strips of paper in the cracks around the doors and windows. Jim thought they all seemed happy enough. He remembered how they got talking about going to California next winter.

Jim admitted he often had hard luck. He'd lose a cow or some pigs, and once a team of horses got struck by lightning. Other years he'd talked of sending the family someplace for the winter, but something always happened. Jane had been on the farm steady for a long time, and Jim could see she needed a change.

Jim Twillen recalled how he was working on the cracks this day of the big blizzard and telling the others how they might be in California next winter and leave all the snowdrifts and cold winds behind. He said the youngsters got quite excited and asked about orange trees and how big was the ocean. Even Jane began to plan what they would wear. Jim thought she was as inter-

ested as the children, even if it was a year ahead and uncertain at that.

While they worked and planned they heard a sound like somebody falling against the door. It was an Indian caught by the storm. He stumbled in and sat on the floor in a corner. They couldn't get him to talk much. He just kind of grunted the way Indians do, and he took whatever they gave him to eat. For two days he sat there just looking at his worn-out moccasins and no doubt wishing he was on the reservation away up north of the Sand Hills.

Jim said the storm ended sometime in the night and with the first peep of daylight he was out digging open the barn door and getting his animals feed and water. When his chores were done he came back to the house. He didn't see the Indian in the corner so he called out to Jane. He asked something about when the Indian went away.

When the children heard him call, Jim said they came out of the bedroom, kind of whimpering, and told him they couldn't find their mother anywhere. They called and looked but they still couldn't find her.

"So Jim don't find her yet," Herman ended regretfully. "Maybe he moves away soon. He thinks the children live under a disgrace so their mother goes off with an Indian."

"Did she really go?" Emma asked doubtfully. "Do you think that's what happened to her?"

"Nobody can know for sure," Herman said. "Only some duck hunters come down from the Sand Hills. They tell about a white woman in a tepee. They want to bring her back out of dirt and smoke, but she don't say nothing to them, even."

"It is so sad!" Elsa sighed with sympathy. "If only she could wait, maybe they all go to California next time."

Herman went out to his work in the barn and the women sat pondering the story of Jane Twillen. They looked at each other with understanding. Herman and other farm husbands might be puzzled to account for Jane's desertion. But these two understood and other women would understand. There seemed

to be no sense in Jane Twillen's action, no romance or glamour, no further prospects.

"I guess she couldn't stand one more day, even," Elsa thought aloud. "Hundreds of days, every day all like each other."

"Yes, that's what happened," Emma agreed, thinking how nearly she also had gone away.

"But a Indian, even!" Elsa sighed.

"Maybe she saw a lot more than just an Indian." Emma tried to explain this sordid phase. Perhaps at the time of their own temptation she and Elsa had imagined qualities in their men that no one else could discern. "Maybe she had read Indian stories," Emma mused. "Stories of great Indian chiefs, a long time ago. Noble red men leading their tribes in some hopeless war against the white race. They might look like heroes, riding in the wind with their eagle feathers streaming out and all that. Maybe this Jane Twillen saw her Indian something like that. No one else can know but Jane Twillen."

"It could be like that," Elsa agreed. "So many times she didn't get to California, too!"

"Disappointment can do queer things to a woman's thoughts." Emma remembered her own experiences. After a silence she said: "I must take the mail back now." It was comforting to sit with Elsa, but Burl would be expecting his paper.

"Maybe you like your pictures now?" Elsa remembered suddenly.

"All right, I could take them now," Emma decided. The photos they had impulsively ordered after their day in the beauty parlor had been left at the Schaffers'. The photographer had sent the package to Elsa. For a long time it had seemed better to Emma not to take home her share of the pictures. Burl's reaction to the beauty-parlor experience had been unfortunate; there would be no pleasure in showing him the photos. Now she held them under her coat as she moved over the hard drifts of the old winter.

Burl had not come in. Emma opened the trunk where her small treasures were kept. For a long moment she gazed at her

own picture. It was hard to believe that once, even for part of a day, she had looked like that. With the picture in her hand she glanced in the mirror. No! No, she must not make such comparisons. She looked away instantly, regretting her impulse. Why deliberately remind herself of time's changes? Not time altogether, but other things—a lot of things—had left their traces.

No doubt it was a vain thought, but Emma wished that Robert might have seen her picture. He would know then how she could look with half a chance. It was a foolish, vagrant thought, but it persisted—if only he might have caught a glimpse of her at her best!

Why not put what she could of herself at the bottom of the trunk next to Robert's poems? Next to the verse that said how much he wanted to see her standing in the door of his cottage! Another foolish, sentimental impulse, Emma admitted, but with swift movements she placed the picture face down against the poem. Always now the picture would be gazing at the poem.

"Maybe I'm getting childish," Emma murmured as she closed the lid of the old trunk.

There came a memory, vague at first, of something just a little like what she had done, something that happened a long time ago. As Emma struggled with the memory it began to come clearer. In a literature class she had studied a poem called *The Statue and the Bust*. It told the story of a devoted couple who, for some reason Emma could not recall, were kept apart. But there had been made a statue of the man and a bust of the girl, or perhaps it was the other way round. Anyway, the statue had been set up on one side of the street and the bust on the other. Thus, through the years, they could gaze at each other with uninterrupted devotion. What she had arranged at the bottom of the trunk was something like that. Perhaps it was not so fanciful after all.

Then Burl's heavy steps sounded in the kitchen, and supper was not quite ready.

14

WITH THE COMING OF SPRING Burl became a whirlwind of activity. He seemed determined to more than recoup himself for the loss of the pigs. The place which became his in November was largely in prairie sod. Two men agreed to a contract for plowing the entire quarter section. These were in addition to the two men who labored on the old homestead and on Tom's farm.

Burl seemed to flourish as a man of authority. He directed operations on three places at once. Sometimes he sent the boys to observe and report on various fields. But they forgot the detailed instructions. They could not resist playing around the edges of the big slough.

"How's the west field look?" Burl would demand when at last they came back.

"It looks all right, Pop." Tom tried to look important, but his information was vague.

"How deep does Noah plow?" Burl persisted.

"Oh, about right, I guess." Tom twisted uncomfortably under the questioning.

"Does he turn under all the weeds? Could you see any sticking up anywhere?"

"I don't remember any weeds," Tom tried desperately.

"Look here! What kind of slipshod farmers will you be, anyway? Put your hand down by the furrow like this, edgeways. If the dirt comes up to here, it's about four inches; if it comes up this far, that's six inches. Now can you remember?"

"Sure I can."

"How long?"

"I can remember, Pop," Fred piped hopefully. "If it's up to here, it's two inches, and up to here is ten inches."

Burl turned away in disgust. When he saw Emma in the yard he complained:

"They haven't any sense at all. Even while I tell 'em, they don't know!"

"They're so young yet." It was her usual intercession.

"Aw, when I was their age . . ." Burl began. Emma waited quietly until his words stopped flowing, although she did not listen to what he said. She wondered if perhaps Tom and Fred might never become interested in the details of farming. It was possible that sons might inherit some maternal qualities.

The season was prosperous. Farmers looking back on this time spoke of it as the "big year." The old homestead and Tom's place were a sea of wheat. But the new land that had been bought for Fred yielded an amazing return. As fast as the men plowed, Burl sowed flax on the newly turned sod. For some reason, which no one understood, there was a world shortage of flax.

Yes, it was a "big year" for the prairies and for the Zither acres. Burl rode from farm to farm, his watchful eye noting every detail from daylight to darkness. He had a saddle horse now; the old Indian pony was retired. Emma sometimes watched Tom and Fred climb on the patient pony. She remembered how the faithful animal had once plunged through a desperate winter's night to her cries of "On, Gypsy, on!"

"Be kind to her, boys," she told them. "She's earned the right to rest."

"Sure, we're kind!" They looked at her curiously, no doubt wondering at her affection for an old Indian pony.

Tired old animals earned their periods of rest, but the same right did not apply to tired humans. Emma often wondered that Burl did not understand how life was going for her. He had so much strength himself that he forgot the weakness of others. His whole mind was so filled with plans for a splendid future that limitations of present endurance seemed to be forgotten. Sometimes he spoke of the day when he could give her everything. His prodigious efforts were bent toward the estab-

ishment of his family on the basis of security and comfort. That there should be great labor and sacrifice along the way seemed not to matter, if only the goal were reached.

Emma felt the slow ebb of her strength. It was as if she used a little more and a little more of a reserve which there was no time to put back. The reserve was not without a limit. Someday the very last would be gone. Emma knew this. She felt it almost daily, and yet some curious restraint prevented any discussion with Burl. If he could not see what a load she bore, then she would make no complaint. Few farm wives had help, although there was no lack of men in the fields. I won't be the first to give in, Emma resolved. I'll keep on—on to the end.

Harvest and threshing brought a frenzy of effort. Men came and went, but there were always men. Tom and Fred were good boys to do as they were told. But, like boys, they must always be told. They brought in potatoes from the field and pails of water from the pump. They cut wood and gathered eggs and carried lunches to the men who worked late. Because a thing must be done today, they did not remember that it must also be done tomorrow. And the next day and the next.

Once, in a casual glance at the weekly paper, Emma read a notice that was common enough. Yet this particular item seemed to fasten upon her imagination with unusual significance. This was her old habit of enlarging a small foundation of fact into a lifetime of imaginary happenings. Again she read the brief notice:

"Died: Mrs. Henry Warren, formerly Irene Roseberry of Vista City, aged thirty-four, wife of Henry Warren of this district. Seven children also mourn her loss."

Another of the first wives worked into an early grave, Emma guessed sadly. Now this Henry Warren, whoever he was, would doubtless look about him for a second. How, otherwise, could his family be cared for?

Somehow, from her name, Emma imagined Irene Roseberry must have been fine looking, sensitive, perhaps a little delicate,

but full of high spirit. Of course she had wonderful expectations when she married Henry. She came from a city, and the vast sweep of the prairie lands had appealed to her in a vague romantic fashion. Out in the land of opportunity she planned to help Henry build up a splendid home. Yes, her dream had been something like that.

Emma wondered when the first disillusion had come. Surely her expectations had not remained intact until the last! It was likely that all along the way they had dropped from her one by one.

So young and inexperienced that first year when she had gone out with this Henry to his homestead! No doubt the first child had been welcome and perhaps the second and third. But seven! Did Henry think her strength was unlimited? Somehow he seemed to be the kind of person who would expect everything. Emma found herself disliking him intensely.

She imagined him showing the youthful Irene how to care for a garden, and explaining the intricacies of milking and churning and feeding calves. And without any instruction, he would expect a good showing in bread baking and pie making. Perhaps she had to cut her own wood as Emma had sometimes noticed others doing. Yes, Henry would expect everything.

No doubt he had been so intent on the business of his fields and barns that he did not notice when Irene began to fade. He would be surprised and even a little resentful that she had left him to face the busy season alone. Only thirty-four! Really young yet and at the best time of life. Such unnecessary sacrifice! But Henry wouldn't understand why.

Irene had not died just last week. Quite likely she had died in spirit years before. Henry wouldn't understand about that, either.

Emma started from her daydreaming. In a few minutes hungry men would be sitting at the kitchen table.

15

ABOUT THE MIDDLE OF THE WINTER Emma noticed big piles of lumber accumulating in the yard. There were neat stacks of shingles and laths and heaps of sand and gravel. Whenever a load of grain went to town a load of something came back. No doubt Burl must have some big building plan in his mind. Emma said nothing to him. Somehow building did not seem as important as in the early days.

In the early spring he told her: "I wanted to make it a surprise, but I guess I can't do that. You'll have to know soon anyway."

Emma had not seen him so excited for a long time. For an instant it came to her mind that perhaps he had planned the long-deferred holiday. But that was hardly possible at this season. Still he might have managed some way. She said: "Go on, Burl, what is it?"

"It's the house, Emma, the big house!" He was so pleased with himself. "I always wanted you to have a house, the best in the country. It'll kind of make up for—other things."

Nothing could make up for some things, but he must not be disappointed. Building the best house in the district was a great event in his life. Emma made an effort to show her interest: "Why, this is a surprise! I never guessed it. I saw all the lumber, but I thought maybe it was a new barn. Have you worked out any plans?"

"Bought the plans too. All worked out by an expert. When it's all ready you can just walk in."

Emma remembered the long hours they had spent in the first shack drawing plans and discussing endless details. There had been a good deal of pleasure in these things, but now the

plans were all done by an expert. That was the way Burl wanted it.

"I can't help seeing the outside, but I won't go in till it's ready," she agreed. "If you'd like to keep it a surprise."

"That's fine! You won't have any of the worry. Just step in like you never saw it before."

He looked at her curiously and some of the heartiness was gone from his voice. She had not shown the gratitude he expected, and Emma could feel his disappointment. But he was committed to the great project now, and it must go forward. He would build the house. It would stand for all to see, the measure of his success.

All the summer there were carpenters and masons and painters. Burl had said she must not worry over the new house. But he had said nothing about not cooking for the gang of extra men. It was strange how men overlooked such things. Not for a moment did Emma doubt that he believed his gift of the house was a great and splendid thing. How willingly she would have exchanged it for a summer's holiday, a month of rest in some strange new place.

There was something unusual in the boys' lack of interest. They never spoke of the new house unless they were asked. They did not loiter around the building or watch the men. Once Burl asked them:

"You boys want a room each or one big room together?"

"I guess maybe it don't matter, Pop," Tom said after a moment.

Burl did not ask them again. When he went out Emma said: "Don't you care about the new house, Tom?"

"Aw, it's all right, Maw! It's all right if Pop likes it."

A few days later Emma discovered Tom and Fred poring over the old Florida pamphlets they had dug out from some hiding place. Once Fred asked:

"Maw, how much would it cost to go to the place we didn't go that winter?"

"I don't know, Son. Maybe a hundred dollars for one person. Maybe not so much."

"If anybody wanted to go, could they walk?"

"I guess they could if it was summertime. But it would be a very long walk."

In spite of his progress Emma could feel that Burl was not happy. Several times he had spoken of a housewarming party when the place was complete. But for weeks he made no mention of it.

Emma inquired from time to time, but perhaps he understood that her questions had no real interest behind them. As she looked at the big house Emma did not think of herself as living in it. She caught herself speculating on how some other woman would manage the house. Farmers nearly always married the second time. Their first wives seemed to wear out like old machines. And, like machines, they had to be replaced. It was a toll the prairies exacted for the hard early years. Some lands were subdued by regiments of soldiers; the prairies were subdued by the first wives of homesteaders.

At last the great day arrived. Only instead of being a great day, there was something melancholy about it. Burl was disappointed, the boys were indifferent, and Emma could not bring herself to feel that she had any real part in it. It was inevitable that she should remember the old sod house and the one-room shacks. How wonderfully they had been a real part of those humble shelters, made possible through the greatheartedness of neighbors!

Even the furniture was left behind. Burl explained: "There's a man and wife coming in the spring. They'll move into the old house just as it stands."

There was no ceremony or rejoicing. The boys had already slept in the big house a night or two. Burl said one morning: "Everything's ready now. It's all right any time you want to go in." He was just leaving for town.

Emma understood. He felt that any enthusiasm on her part must be forced. He did not want to be present when she first

entered the house. It was all so different from his plan of early spring that tears came to her eyes. She clung to his arm:

"Burl! You don't have to go away like this."

"I got to sign some papers for Israel."

"I want you to know I do think it's a wonderful house you've built."

"Aw, it just didn't work out." His voice was rough with feeling. With a shout to the horses he sprang upon the wagon.

Emma turned sadly to the big house. As she entered she remembered how Burl had carried her across the threshold of their first little shack, the one that had burned the year after. He said it was an old custom, and they had been happy together—with nothing. Nothing but hope and the future shining from their eyes. Last Sunday the preacher had read a verse about man's life consisting not in the abundance of the things that he hath. She wondered if Burl had heard—and understood.

As Emma moved through the large rooms she remembered, too, how Burl had talked of a big party for this first time in the new house. No doubt he had thought of Heck and Sam, of Israel and Levi, Andrew and Herman, and all the old companions who had worked and struggled together through the early years. These were the grand neighbors who had built them a sod house when fire had taken the other. They had come again when the sod began to fall and Burl had been helpless from fever.

And now he wanted to show them the great house he had built for himself. But somehow the whole project had gone flat. Now that it was finished, no one really wanted the big house. The sacrifice had been too great. Somehow along the way they had missed the meaning of life. In the struggle for abundance they had drifted apart—drifted so that now it was hard to talk about the things that really mattered.

With tears of regret Emma dropped on one of the beds. This was a nice bed that an expert had chosen. She thought of other beds—beds of hay or straw and grain sacks and old blankets—and happiness.

In the days that followed Emma tried to make Burl believe that she cared about the big house. But he discouraged all such talk, probably doubting its sincerity.

"It's wonderful to have a furnace and all the rooms warm at once," she told him.

"Yes, it's all right," he agreed absently. Perhaps he was dreaming of the old days of brushwood instead of coal.

"I never expected so many shelves and cupboards," she said again.

"It was the expert's idea," Burl explained without looking up. He no longer wanted praise for anything.

Throughout the winter it was impossible to free herself from the conviction that her work was done. The farm was securely established now. Tom and Fred were old enough to look after themselves. Burl was still in vigorous middle age. With his present prosperity he would find it easy to marry again. All resentment against him died away. He had done the best he knew how, better than most men would have done. He had faults, of course, little human weaknesses common to all.

As the winter passed, Emma felt an inexplicable desire to hear again the old call of wild geese. She asked the boys to tell her of the first migrations.

"They've come, Maw!" Fred said one night.

Emma slipped alone into the spring dusk. She moved slowly across the yard to the edge of the poplar plantation. The trees were tall now, and not so long ago she had helped Burl plant them. Tom had slept in his crude barrel cradle, and while they planted the bits of trees geese had passed overhead. Emma remembered resting a moment while they watched them. They had talked and dreamed about following the birds someday. But somehow the dreams had been lost and the day did not come.

She leaned against a sturdy white trunk and waited. Down through the darkness came the familiar gabbling voices. Not the wild remote honking of the day, but a continuous, intimate converse which only the night made safe. As Emma listened, her old regret vanished. The span of a human lifetime was too

brief in which to accomplish everything. But such a span did not limit accomplishment. One had all time—a measureless infinity of years. The dreams had not been really lost; they could still come true. Again she remembered the verse that had come to her the night of the great blizzard: "That which hath been is now; and that which is to be hath already been." There was nothing lost, nothing too late, and no lack of time for everything.

At the beginning of harvest a hired man and his wife came into the little house. Burl wanted someone who was settled, someone who would stay a long time and not have to be shown what to do every year.

The first Sunday in August Emma did not get up in the morning. "You and the boys go on to church," she told Burl. "I'll be all right when you come back."

Just resting was so wonderful that before it seemed possible they were home again. They would be hungry, expecting dinner to be ready for them. Yes, they must have dinner right away. Just another few minutes' rest and then dinner. But before the five minutes were up it was dark and there was a lighted lamp in the room. Burl was standing by the lamp.

"I'm sorry it's so late. I'll be up right away. It won't take me a minute to get dinner."

"Don't move," Burl said solemnly. "The woman from the Little House came over. She'll do everything." He stood looking at her a long time.

It was a comfort to know that she didn't have to get up. Burl and the boys would be cared for whether she got up or not. It was strange to think that they didn't really need her any longer. When the boys were small and there was no money to hire help, her work had been vital. Now they could go on and she would not be greatly missed.

When she looked again there was sunshine in the room. It was amazing how fast night and day seemed to follow one after the other. There was a strange man in the room, too, and Burl was with him. Burl said:

"This is the doctor, Emma. He wants to see you."

The doctor moved to the side of the bed. This was not the old doctor who had come out a long time ago to the sod house. He was a new doctor, and Emma felt him hold her wrist and she watched him listen with rubber tubes fastened to his ears. Then he said:

"How do you feel?"

"All right," she told him. "I'll be up soon now."

"No pain anywhere?"

"Only tired," she admitted. "Would it be all right if I rested a little more?"

"Rest as long as you like." He put her hand under the sheet and went out with Burl.

When she opened her eyes again it was night with the lamp burning. Tom and Fred were standing in the shadows near the door, gazing at her. Just as she was about to speak to them the doctor came in and the boys disappeared. The doctor said:

"Your husband asked me to tell you. He thought it was best and that you would want to know. He felt he couldn't tell you himself. Perhaps you really won't mind it as much as he does." He paused to see if she understood.

"I know what you mean," Emma said slowly, "and I don't mind—very much."

"I'm sorry I couldn't do anything," the doctor told her.

"Nobody could do anything," she assured him. "I'm only tired." After a moment she added wistfully: "Could I just rest—from now on?"

The doctor nodded without saying anything. As he was about to go Emma said:

"Don't tell Burl I said that about resting. It might make him— Only don't tell him, anyway."

"I won't tell him," the doctor promised, and went out.

The next time the sun was shining in that incredible way it had of suddenly exchanging with darkness. Burl was coming in the door and the two boys tiptoed behind him.

"It's nice to have the sun." Somehow she must try and cheer

their gloom. They gathered around, the boys looking frightened. In the silence she heard the click-click of a binder through the open windows.

"You should be out there," she whispered to Burl. "It's harvesttime. I'm sorry to make so much trouble."

She felt Burl take her hands in his big one. He was trying to tell her something, but it wasn't quite clear enough to understand. No doubt he would be blaming himself for something, but he mustn't do that.

"You've been so good to me." She looked at Burl. "Too good. I didn't need the big house—but it was grand to do, anyway."

She meant to tell the boys something, but they seemed to have gone away. Burl was there, because she could feel the clasp of his big hand.

"Can you do without me, Burl—for a while?"

Burl made no answer, but he must know what she meant. His hand was still there.

"You'll find a pie—on the top shelf. It's for your dinner—Sunday."

Even now he did not answer. But his hand was there. Always his hand would be there.

Part II

BURL

I

WHEN A MAN has had the death sentence passed upon him it is sure to change his way of thinking, if not his way of life. There is, first of all, the inevitable calculation on how much of life is left. Perhaps the doctor's verdict may be wrong. People sometimes live on and on for years after they have been expertly told that it is impossible.

Whenever old Burl Zither decided that he might confound the prediction of Dr. Prentiss that strange new feeling came over him in waves of weariness. It was not like being tired after a long day in the wheat harvest. It was a deeper, more fundamental tiredness, a sort of let-down feeling that did not vanish after a long night's rest.

"Nothing definite," the doctor had told Burl. "Just a general disintegration."

"Well, fix me up, Doc," Burl ordered. "I got work to do; lots of work."

Dr. Prentiss had looked at him a little sadly. "I'm afraid there's no fixing up this time, Mr. Zither. How old are you?"

"Only eighty-two, Doc."

"Threescore and ten is the human span," the doctor reminded him. "You've been living a long while on borrowed time."

He had thought a good deal about that "borrowed time" idea. Yes, no doubt it was true. Seventy years was a good average life, probably much longer than average, really. But somehow he had never thought of himself as average. Heck Phinney on the next farm had dropped off at seventy-two and Sam Bee-

man at seventy-four. Levi Phalen had passed at about sixty-five or -six. But the master of the Zither farm had not thought of himself as subject to human frailty. The old-timers dropped off now and again, yet he had thought of himself as striding over his beloved acres on and on through an endless succession of years.

And now he had been given a year! A year at the most, if he kept very quiet and rested a good deal. That was the hard part—resting. Resting was an art or a gift that he had never practiced. Old Butch Hodgins, the town loafer, would know how to do that. Butch could sit motionless beside the railway track or on the post-office bench for hours at a time.

After the first shock of the doctor's verdict had passed a little, the thought of not following his directions had been pondered. Why rest only to drag out a pointless existence a few months longer? Why not slam into things and take whatever happened? The old pioneers were always wishing to die with their boots on, and perhaps it was the best way.

Doctors didn't know everything, anyway. Especially young doctors with new theories and notions. Burl had often thought of himself as a kind of prairie cycle living through the seasons of life. Long ago he had used up his springtime and summer, and even the autumn had gone. Now the doctor had said that winter was closing about him.

Ah, but there was another season this young city doctor had not thought about. Often when winter seemed to be clamping down over the great flat land the snow mysteriously disappeared, the clouds drifted away, and the sun took on a new benignity of yellow warmth. Yes, perhaps the doctor did not know about the prairie Indian summer. It was a time of windless perfection, of hazy light and floating gossamer. But, most of all, it was a kind of reprieve from the inevitable coming of the long winter. And perhaps he, Burl Zither, might have such an Indian summer before his endless winter shut down upon him.

It was strange, now, to be thinking of last things. If the doctor knew his business, then this was the last spring to watch the greening of the trees and the sprouting of the long, thin drills of wheat. Already the swelling cottonwood buds were sticky with sap and first meadow larks called and answered from their fence-post perches.

If the high land was dry enough, Jim would start seeding today. Jim Yost and his wife Osa lived in the Little House on the other side of the big barn. Jim and Osa had come the year Fred had gone to the Great War. Over twenty years ago, and it seemed like a day. Jim was the best hired man who had ever lived in the Little House. A bit slow, perhaps, but he never forgot anything. He farmed the Zither acres as if they had been his own. He looked after the extra summer help and no doubt enjoyed his small world of authority.

Osa was equally dependable and a lot smarter. Every day she came to put the big Zither house in order and to cook. Sometimes Burl thought of having Jim and Osa move into the Big House to help fill the lonely rooms. But he had never got around to a real decision. It was not exactly easy to have strangers live in the rooms where Tom and Fred had played and where Emma had mothered them through the early years.

The sun was warm on the steps of the back porch. All the old homestead was visible from here and parts of the newer farms that had been added later. These added acres had been intended for Tom and Fred, but oddly enough they seemed to care little about land. It was hard to understand about sons. No matter what plans a father made for them, they seemed determined to live their own lives. It had been the same with Harry, Sam Beeman's son, and with Scud Phinney. They had gone away and their fathers had died, and now old Lizzie Beeman and Sarah Phinney lived alone on their run-down farms.

What would happen to these old places? And, in particular, what would happen to his own acres? Emma had no relatives, except perhaps distant cousins in the old country that she had seldom mentioned. He had no living kin of his own. A year

from now, if the doctor was right, his own beloved fields would be ownerless.

It was disquieting, monstrous, really, to think of the splendid trees, the big barn, the house, everything, without an owner. People passed, of course; their time was brief. But somehow land must go on and on, always. The earth was a permanent thing, a sort of divinely worked out plan of supplying the world with its source of life. It was unthinkable that the great solid fields should ever cease their endless round of production.

There had been times when the impulse to transfer the farm to Jim and Osa had been strong upon him. They were good enough in their way, but still they were a hired couple. And Fred might come back! It was pretty well established that Tom had lost his life in some wild Mexican adventure. But about Fred there was no definite knowledge. War officials had done what they could to trace him, but they had discovered nothing. Somewhere in the vast welter of men, millions of men and guns, he had been lost. Almost without a doubt he had perished, but the doubt still remained. There were records of soldiers whose shattered memories had been restored and who had found their homes again after years of wandering. Such a miracle had been possible for a year or two, even for five or ten years. But twenty years had dimmed the hope almost to extinction. And yet—somehow it had never been possible to give away the inheritance meant for him.

Burl watched Osa come from the Little House and make her careful way across the barnyard. She carried a cloth-covered tin basin into the henhouse. Undoubtedly she had eggs for the hens **already** beginning to set. It was marvelous how ordinary things like hens knew enough to set, always with the coming of spring. Somehow they understood that the race of hens must be continued, although they themselves perished within a brief span. It was difficult to find words to talk about such things, but the recurrence of earth's life cycle had always held something of wonder.

"But I'm the **last** Zither," Burl thought sadly. "There'll be no

more of us anywhere." Somehow he had failed where frail and even rather stupid things had succeeded.

He watched Jim at the near end of a field. Jim lifted a bag of wheat and emptied it into the seeder. Then the four horses began the long, slow march to the far end. Another seedtime, growth, harvest; the wonder of the old life cycle all over again.

When the days lengthened Burl began a slow inspection of his trees. The trees were his secret pride. As the years passed he felt that he had failed in many things. He had failed especially with his own family. But, if any memory of him remained, that memory would be perpetuated by his trees. For years the farm had been known as Zither Woods.

At first the name had been used with a derisive note, but now the way people said Zither Woods held a tone of profound respect. They thought that in some mysterious way he must have foreseen the coming of the drought years. He had not, of course, any more prophetic ability than other farmers. But it pleased him to let them think he had. It helped to compensate for the years when they giped him about wasting good wheat acres in tree plantations.

Other farms drifted like snow. The fine soil sifted into banks and even took to the air in black dust blizzards. But the long Zither fields between solid walls of trees continued to yield their wheat and oats and barley as they had always yielded.

The double row of maples around the Big House had flourished for sixty years. He had planted them the year after coming to the old homestead place. Their great branches interlaced in a kind of protective brotherhood. The seeds hung in clusters. They were little miniatures reminding Burl of the bunches of bananas in Matthew Sneed's store window.

At the back of the Little House where Jim and Osa lived stood a plantation of poplars. Half a century they had grown, ever since the spring after he had married Emma, because he remembered she had helped him in the planting. Now all summer the leaves twirled, murmuring and whispering with every breeze. He liked to feel their smooth trunks, thinking that per-

haps Emma had touched the same spot. She had held the trees upright while he shoveled the dirt around them.

Half the old pasture field must now be covered by elms, and every slough had its margin of red and yellow willows. Cottonwoods marched in unbroken files along the edge of every field. In odd corners birch and ash continued their slow but steady growth. Yes, it had been a tremendous labor, this turning of the bare prairie into a semiforest.

Deep in an elm grove, like a kind of holy of holies, stood an oak tree. It stood in the center of a small clearing, like a young monarch surrounded by hoary subjects. He had never explained the origin of this oak tree. An oak tree on the prairie was something of a mystery, and he let it stay that way.

The spring Fred had left for the war he had gone into the Sand Hills, a great series of badlands far north of the town. Experts said these hills had once been the floor of a great lake in the dimness of prehistoric time. A thin sprinkling of shiftless squatters existed in the hills. Men had been scarce that spring, and Burl had tried to persuade two of the hill men to help with the seeding. But they had refused. On the way home, in a tangled valley of scrub, he had found the little oak tree.

That was over twenty years ago, and in its new home the oak had lived and grown in its slow way. It was the last tree he had planted, the last tree he would ever plant. Somehow when Fred did not come home it had hardly seemed worth while doing anything like that.

But people found out about the oak. Neighbors taking a short cut through Zither Woods, or Sunday-school classes which he allowed to use the woods for picnics, came across the tree:

"Oh, Mr. Zither, did you know you had an oak tree?"

"Yes, I knew it."

"How did it get there?"

"I guess it must have sprung up."

"Will it grow acorns?"

"Sure it will."

It was the acorn question that assumed real importance.

People told him an oak would not flourish on the harsh, dry prairie.

"You got to have a moist country like England," Heck Phinney explained. "Maybe you'll keep it alive for a few years, but it won't really grow."

Every autumn they asked him good-naturedly about the acorn crop, and every autumn he assured them it would come next year. But although the tree grew, it produced nothing but leaves.

Yet he had a strange affection for the tree. He remembered hearing Fred read from his school history years ago about oak trees. Some English king had ordered the planting of acorns. There had been penalties for cutting oaks. A long time back, oaks had been the great material for building ships. There was something slow but reliable about them. The tree became a symbol in his mind. It stood for all desirable human qualities that were hard to describe in words.

And someday the tree would yield its seed. From the sprouting seed would spring a countless generation of prairie oaks, all originating from the great Zither oak—the father of them all. It was a fanciful thought that he liked to play with as he sat on warm days in the shade of this tree of destiny.

Every hedge and grove and row of trees reminded him of something. Nearly always something about Emma or the two boys. Emma had helped him with the poplars just a few weeks before the coming of infant Tom. She was almost a girl then, dancing and twinkling like a leaf herself.

Once on a warm and windless summer night, when sleep refused to come, he had wandered out under the old poplars. There was a pleasant coolness in their depth, the feel of woody moisture in the soft carpet of years; fifty years of carpetmaking, a layer of leaves every year.

It was easy to remember the Emma of fifty years ago. It was not so easy to know that if she had lived she must have been an old woman of seventy. It was impossible to think of Emma

as old. She had always been so small and quick and birdlike, a sort of canary around the house.

She had held the little trees, laughing and talking about a swing they could tie from a branch when the trees grew large enough. Wild geese had gone over in the dusk, the first of the spring migration. The work was halted for a moment so that they might listen to the honking high overhead.

Then Emma said: "Wouldn't you like to follow the geese when they come back, away south to wherever they go?"

And he had answered solemnly: "Yes, we'll do that."

"When we get everything all going right and have a good crop, you won't forget, will you, Burl?" She had been happy and eager that night.

But somehow they had forgotten. Tom had come and then Fred. And always the rush of springtime and harvest and the thousand things that never got done in between. No, Emma had never followed the wild geese. She had not gone anywhere, not until she had suddenly gone off on the long, long journey, all alone.

She had never reproached him; not in words. Perhaps not even in her thoughts. He wouldn't know about that as he sat under Emma's poplars. He wondered how she had felt about life—if she had been disappointed with the life he had given her. Sometimes he thought of asking her, but it was a difficult thing to talk about, offhand. They were always too driven with work really to know each other. Emma had been a wonderful wife, but he did not tell her what he thought. He had always meant to tell her, to take time off and become acquainted with the real Emma.

But the seasons seemed to pile on top of each other and the years slipped away, and almost before he knew it Emma had slipped away too. There had been no following of the wild geese, no going anywhere.

Emma was not insistent about anything. As he sat under the whispering poplars he remembered scraps of talk, little suggestions she had made:

"If there's no hail or frost we might go to California this winter."

"Maybe, if prices come up." He could really never oppose Emma.

Prices had been good, so good that suddenly he decided to build the big barn he had been dreaming about for years. When the ground was frozen he began hauling lumber out from town. Everything must be ready for the great building the next summer. Only when the timbers were partly piled on the new site did he remember about California. It was too late then. Emma had not reminded him. He wondered if she had been greatly disappointed.

Several years later, when Tom and Fred were partly grown, Emma said:

"The Schaffers are going to Florida. Elsa told me today."

"Is old Herman going? I didn't think he'd spend the money."

"It won't cost so much," Emma assured him, as if she had been urging their own going. "They'll drive down. They've written to somebody about renting a cottage. It'll be under palm trees, Burl."

He remembered now exactly how Emma had looked when she talked about palm trees. Without definite words or promises, each had known that the other had treasured a hope of joining the Schaffers. Emma must have noticed that he got up an hour earlier to speed the fall plowing. Once he came across two odd little garments on which Emma had been sewing. He had never set eyes on a bathing suit, but somehow he knew she had been making them for the boys.

It was the year when pork was high. He had guessed how it would be, and all summer sixty pigs were fed for the early November market. Suddenly cholera spread among the animals, and in a week the pens were empty. Without really talking about it, he and Emma seemed to know that their holiday was over before it began.

He felt almost as if someone had taken six or seven hundred dollars out of his pants pocket. Of course they could have man-

aged, he knew that now. He could have borrowed the money in ten minutes from old Israel Bower. He could have deferred a payment on the new quarter section he was buying for young Tom. The order for the big feed crusher might have been canceled. Yes, he knew now, there were half a dozen ways they might have managed.

Instead they had taken over the Schaffer cows the day Elsa and Herman started for their palm-shaded cottage. All winter Emma made butter every other day. It had been her own valiant suggestion as a means of recouping their loss.

It was easy now to look back through the regretful years. But regret could not restore anything. There was little comfort in assuring himself that it was right to be ambitious. He wanted to give Emma a nice house, to make it easy for the boys to start, to have a secure feeling as they all grew older. But no one had grown older, only he himself, who had made all the mistakes. In bending their strength toward a distant playtime, there had been no playtime for any of them.

That was it! They should have taken time for play. All of them! Suddenly the regrets and vague recriminations concentrated themselves into a single theme. Playtime! If only he had given Emma her playtimes, she might have stayed with him years longer. And the boys! If he had relaxed with them, or even let them off to find their own pleasure, he might not now be alone. But he had cared for them so much, worked so hard for their future, that he had forgotten about the present.

How futile now to think of Emma making butter all winter, after cooking through the summer for the carpenters who were building the Big House! How useless the Big House in which she had lived but a year!

Only at night, under the murmuring poplars, did he let himself think of that last year. Somehow Emma seemed nearer among the trees. He remembered exactly how she had apologized for failing him in the busy season:

"I didn't mean to be this way, Burl." She tried to smile up at him. "I thought I could hold out till after harvest."

He had brought in big Elvira Minders for the kitchen, and Rose Lee came over to be with Emma.

"I'm sorry, Burl," Emma whispered later. "I'm awfully sorry to make you so much trouble."

Saturday night the doctor came out from town. He just shook his head without trying to do anything. Perhaps Emma knew, when the doctor did nothing, how it would be. Or perhaps she knew anyway. It was about midnight that she whispered again:

"Can you get along without me, Burl?" And finally: "It was good of you to build the Big House."

He could still hear the whispered words as if it had been yesterday. He could see Emma clearly, trying, but not quite managing, the old brave smile. Then a strange thing happened under the midnight poplars. Or perhaps it was later, the dark period just before the first streaks of daylight.

At the far edge of the trees he had heard a slight rustling. It was something partly heard and partly felt but more definite than the vague whispering of leaves. The sound moved slowly toward him, advancing from tree to tree, down the long rows. He waited tense but without fear. He made no motion, scarcely daring to breathe. He stared into the thick darkness beneath the trees, wondering but not really expecting to see anything.

Then, almost at the moment of revelation, the sudden crowing of a rooster shattered the silence. A faint sighing fled and died away down the dark trees. He saw the first streak of dawn as a ripple of breeze began to waken the leaves to a new morning.

It was over. The strange exaltation dropped from him like the sloughing off of a coat. He sat on until sunrise, thinking. Emma! Emma coming to him through her trees. He could not talk to anyone about it. They would smile, believing the experience to be only an old man's fancy.

2

THROUGHOUT THE SUMMER he tried again and again. Several times on warm, soundless nights he felt the same faint stirring which was not of the wind or the leaves. Each time it came a little stronger, advanced a little nearer.

Heavy frosts crept over the land, then gusty winds, and suddenly the trees were stiff and bare. But with the coming of a new spring came new hope. Perhaps, if he dared, it might be possible to advance greatly or even to bring about the supreme moment which he desired but of which he must always stand in awe.

Now the trees were coming to life again. There was no sign yet of swelling buds on the elms or ash. But over the poplars—Emma's poplars—hung a mist of green. Down their long aisles they must soon begin their whispering, a summer-long, day-and-night whispering. They needed only a strong sun.

There was always comfort in the coming of the spring sun. As the sun waxed into the heat of summer a satisfaction spread through him that could not be explained in words, at least not in any words of his. It had always been so.

As long as he could remember, others had marveled at his ability to work through the hot spells of a prairie summer:

"You should move to Africa, Burl."

"Maybe I should."

"Don't it bother you none, this scorcher?"

"Can't say I've noticed it yet."

It was the same every season. He always saved special work for the periods others spoke of as "hot spells." Sizzling days, when teams were taken in from the fields and farmers sat idle in the shade of their barns, he reserved for tasks not needing the labor of animals.

At such times he hunted out wild mustard and Russian thistle from the grainfields. Moving up and down, up and down, across the wide fields, he uprooted the noxious weeds which somehow seemed to come in spite of all diligence. He liked to feel the strength of the sun on his back and shoulders and watch the quivering heat waves on the flat horizons.

Now with the coming of a new season of heat, which the doctor had said would be his last, he began to think about the sun. To miss the sun, to know that he would never feel its benign warmth again, was an intolerable thought. At first there seemed little that could be done about so hard a fate. Then, possibly a remembrance of some long-ago reading, came the idea of cremation. At first the thought seemed almost repellent, but gradually the thing became a fixed resolve. Ashes might be scattered anywhere, on the surface, on the hill even, where the first and last beams of the sun must always strike.

The more he thought of it the firmer became his determination. Neighbors would think he had a strange whim, thus trying to keep himself in the sun. "A little queer," the folks would say, shaking their heads, and some of the older church women would talk of Burl Zither's "heathen custom." Let them talk! He would write down his instructions, just like a last will and testament, and Jim and Osa were faithful enough to carry them out.

It was not easy to decide on the spot where he should be scattered. Perhaps the top of one of the Sand Hills, or beside his one oak tree, or near Emma's poplars. Perhaps even on a bit of old prairie where the virgin sod had never been turned. Here purple crocuses might push through in early spring and orange lilies expand to the heat of summer. Or a patch of silver buffalo bushes, to serve as a remembrance of his earliest years.

It was strange how, at the last end of life, a man's thoughts kept going back to the very beginning. Almost as if some mysterious force seemed to be trying to join the extremes of life. Joining the ends, he thought, as the old blacksmith joined a wagon tire. There was something strange in man, some instinct of rebellion that did not easily submit to broken ends but

struggled to perpetuate itself in some kind of an endless cycle.

It was easy now, easier than it had been for years, to recall the old prairie. There had been no Emma then, no Tom or Fred; only the oxen, silent except for the clicking of their wide horns as they moved through a sea of grass.

Somehow there had never come again an exaltation quite like those early years. He had never tried to explain it to anyone, not even to Emma. It was something that really could not be put into words at all. Something to experience but not to talk about.

He remembered now how he felt as he walked on land no man had trod before. He had turned furrows in fields that no man had ever plowed. He had piled buffalo bones in heaps and started a new civilization. With his bare hands he had wrested life from a land that had never before yielded life. Sods gave him his earliest shelter. It was like living in the very heart of the earth itself, a great mother waiting for her strong children to come and claim her gifts.

All this and a lot more. But he would have stumbled into a hopeless confusion of words had he tried to explain. He had often wondered if other homesteaders had felt as he felt. Sam Beeman and Cephus Minders, Heck Phinney, Andrew Lee and Levi Phalen; they had seemed solid and earthy, as if they had no thought beyond the day's work. Perhaps they had held the same opinion of him. Anyway, there had been no talk except of the details of weather and yields or prices. Now he would never know whether these others had experienced the same lift of spirit as their plows touched the virgin fields. They rested now in the little square behind the town where the long grass already began to claim its old dominion. No, he would never know how these old-timers had felt about the things of the spirit.

Emma might have understood. At least she would have been kind about it; she would have made him believe she understood, anyway. But perhaps there were things that no one could really talk about to another. Lonely things that only one person felt and could never rightly share with another.

A thousand times the old regret returned that he and Emma had never come to know each other. They had never taken time to talk about things that mattered. What had Emma expected out of life? Had she been satisfied as far as she had gone? What did she think about the mysterious future? The future that perhaps she knew now so thoroughly. What had she expected that future to be like? Did she think they would know each other? Do things together? She must have had thoughts about these things. But this was a part of themselves they had never revealed to each other. Perhaps such thoughts were meant to be kept apart, each going his lonely way, each exploring the future mysteries by himself.

In the early summer Burl began to move about the edges of the Big Slough. The place would not mean much to anyone else, but for him it was a wonderful reviver of memories. Here was the spot where Tom and Fred played, where they would have spent all their summer days had he not dragged them away for more important activities.

He wondered now if what he made them do was really more important. It had seemed so at the time, but there had been no perspective of years by which to judge the comparative importance of play and work.

In the early years the Big Slough had been but a wide depression in the flat prairie. In spring melting snow filled it from side to side, a sparkling lake in the cold sunshine. With the coming of warm days, rushes sprang up and cattails and a tall forest of coarse grass. The water receded and was finally lost from sight, hidden under a mass of growth. But it never quite dried up.

Here in this miniature jungle Tom and Fred had waded, shouting and splashing, and making winding trails through the high grass. They had imagined themselves Indians on the war-path or mighty African hunters. There were muskrat houses and the floating nests of slough gulls and mud hens, frogs and harmless snakes, a marvelous collection of life and growth of undying fascination to small boys.

Burl sat beneath the willow trees he had planted all about the

slough edge. He listened to the watery calls of red-winged blackbirds and a peculiar whistling noise in the depth of the rushes. Tom and Fred would have known what made the strange whistling.

He remembered one hot summer afternoon coming to call them for work in the turnip field. They had answered reluctantly from the depth of the slough. They had come out splashing and blinking in the strong light and begging for just another hour. And he had refused them. They had gone off without a word, disappointed and angry, to start thinning the long rows of young turnips.

Burl recalled as clearly as if it had all happened yesterday. He remembered his almost overwhelming desire to pull off his boots, roll up his pants legs, and plunge in to play with his sons. How amazed they would have been had their stern, toil-driven father relaxed in the midst of a working day. With their first embarrassment passed, what a time they might have had!

But he had suppressed the impulse. The boys had trotted silently in front of him to their long afternoon in the heat. What had happened to the turnips? Had they yielded a good crop? He could not remember now. Probably, in the long scheme of things, turnips or no turnips had made no difference at all. But acquaintance with his sons might have made a tremendous difference.

His own discipline had been strict. He held the belief that steady work and regular hours brought young boys into settled habits, taught them the value of things. But somehow it had not worked out that way for Tom and Fred. The harder he drove them, the more they had turned against the land.

And nearly all the labor had been planned for the boys' ultimate benefit. It had seemed at the time as if they were old enough to understand, but perhaps not. Young people did not think much about the future; today's fun seemed to be all they cared about. That was all right too. The only sad part was that he had not understood in time. He had expected old heads on very young shoulders.

He remembered the time when young Tom played on a ball team. He was a pitcher, which he explained was the most important part of a team. Between two prairie towns a game had been arranged for a hot July Saturday.

"I got to be there early." He remembered the earnestness of young Tom's face. "There's a lot to look after."

It had seemed like a good time to deliver a cow, sold to the town butcher.

"You help with the cow," he had told Tom. "Then you can play all day." It had seemed fair.

They started early on the ten-mile journey. But the cow did not like to leave the familiar countryside. There were many sudden attempts to turn back. Tom galloped after the retreating animal and they started again and again. Progress was slow.

Then the homesick cow was tied firmly behind the wagon and they maintained a slow but steady speed. Mile after hot mile they plodded on through mosquito clouds.

The cow became sullen or perhaps tired. She braced her front legs, but the team pulled her along. Then, in utter abandonment, she flopped flat on the dusty trail. To drag an animal so would cause almost certain injury. They all paused for rest, the cow maintaining a hostile eye.

Under much prodding and tail twisting from Tom, they began again. Progress became slower, almost none at all. Tom worked in a frenzy of impatience and anger, belaboring the animal at every flop.

The day wore on. There were tears in the boy's eyes. No doubt he was thinking every moment of his ball game. But it had seemed foolish to abandon an animal already sold, for so slight a matter as a boy's game.

Several times, Burl remembered now, he had been on the point of telling Tom to ride on to his game. But the idea of leaving a half-finished task had seemed a poor example to set before his son.

Through heat and mosquitoes they labored on, finishing the business at sunset. Burl remembered perfectly how they had

plodded the long trail home in the darkness. He could hear yet the queer little gulping sounds that came from the boy as he thought of his lost game.

It had been a sad, embarrassing journey with no word spoken. He had tried to speak. He regretted the lost game and he really wanted to tell Tom that he had not meant things to turn out that way. But a father apologizing to a young son was not easy, and he had not quite been able to bring himself to do it.

If only he had put his arm around the heartbroken boy! If they could have overcome the strange barrier of restraint and made a lasting friendship as the wagon jolted on into the night. And how little it had really mattered about the cow! Another day and what difference?

Even the great double row of cottonwoods along the south line of the land he always thought of as Tom's brought a twinge of regret. Upward of forty years ago the trees had been started. He and Tom had planted the cuttings from which arose now the great green wall. But Tom had helped against his will.

"I promised the others I'd hunt wild geese. We got new bows'n arrows."

"You can't get any that way." It was a foolish business with such wary birds.

"I know, but we can try. It's fun just to try."

"You try next Saturday."

"They'll all be gone then. They're nearly all gone over now."

Burl remembered how he had tried to explain the urgency of the work. It had been a cool, showery day, perfect weather for starting young cuttings.

"Don't you want trees, Son? This'll be your land when you grow up."

"I don't want land," the boy rebelled. "I want to hunt geese."

"You'll want land when you get older." And all day they had worked putting the little budded sticks into the moist earth.

Yes, the trees had been successful. They were the stoutest cottonwoods in the whole country. But Tom had really not wanted the land after all. No doubt he had gone away with-

out a single regret for the heritage that might have been his.

He had not even looked back once, the morning he tramped away through the first November snow. No doubt he hated the place so much that he tried not to carry away a single last memory.

Of course his last memory had not been so happy either. A real farmer should not harbor in his mind a bit of hard work. But perhaps Tom had not been a real farmer. What he wanted to be had never been discussed. In a prairie country with a ready-made farm waiting for him, there seemed nothing else that a boy could think of doing.

Perhaps his boys had thought of many other kinds of work. He had decided for them and they did not argue about it. They had quietly gone away and they never came back.

It was queer they had not even looked back, not one lingering look at house and barns and trees or even at their father standing in the kitchen door and watching them go, one after the other.

There was no doubt that Tom had left in anger. Just because he had been laughed at; that, no doubt, and a lot of other stored-up reasons. There had been pigs to ship. Heck Phinney had called in the night to report the arrival of a stock car in town. All farmers who had agreed together to send off a car of live animals must hurry them to the loading platform. Railways did not like to keep their cars waiting.

Too bad there happened to be a cold sleety rain all night. No doubt it was hard to turn out of a warm bed in the dark and flounder about in the muck of the hogpens. The hogs had not been willing to be caught and flung into the waiting wagon box. They made frantic efforts to escape. It was necessary to plunge after them, to dive for a slippery hind leg, overturn them and, with a mighty heave, to swing them up and over.

Old Noah Barger had been the hired man that year. The three of them plunged and struggled in the lantern light, while the hogs squealed and the rain fell in a long, cold slant.

When the last struggling animal was loaded they surveyed

themselves—strange, unrecognizable creatures of dripping slime. Noah had chuckled a little, and when Tom came into the lantern light with his smeared tragic face the older man laughed aloud.

But Tom did not see it that way: "Maybe you think this is funny, but I don't!" And he stalked into the darkness.

Yes, perhaps the boy couldn't see it their way. He was something of his frail mother's son, no doubt, and lacked the gusty hardihood of the pioneers.

At daylight, when Burl and Noah came back from the railway car, Tom had been coming out the lane with a small bundle.

"Where to, son?" old Noah called. "We got the car finished."

"Anywhere!" Tom's strained young voice broke. "Anywhere people don't live like hogs!"

"He'll be back," Noah rumbled. But Tom had not come back. Just like that he had left without a word to his father.

Perhaps with a mother it might have been different, but Emma had been gone a long time. A hired woman around the house was not the same, but it was the best that could be done.

At long intervals there were rumors of Tom, or of someone who looked like him. Almost positively he had been seen in Mexico. It was in a wild part, the postmaster explained once to Burl, and no doubt he had perished in a revolution a long time ago.

3

AS BURL SAT WATCHING the gulls wheel and drop into the long grass of the slough, he let his mind wander to the far places he had often dreamed about. Places like the South Seas, Malay, Java, Ceylon, Papua; there was a satisfaction in letting the exotic names pass through his mind. In some dim, prosperous

future he had expected to see something of the great world; perhaps not a very definite expectation, but something that persisted, vague and pleasant.

No one knew of his longing for the great sea lanes; not even Emma had ever guessed. Something of this wandering spirit may have passed to Tom and Fred. He had sternly suppressed his longings and become a prosperous farmer, a substantial citizen, respected alike by neighbors and townspeople. But his sons had yielded, a weak yielding, he thought sometimes. They had disappeared, their very names lost, leaving behind no record of achievement.

What if every man followed his impulses? There would be no well-regulated farms, no businesses, no permanence anywhere. Only a country of wanderers, like the early Indian tribes. And yet there was something tremendously satisfying in a carefree, primitive way of life. Perhaps, after all, Tom and Fred had been right in leaving the ready-made farms he had waiting for them.

He, Burl Zither, had gone forth impatiently from his father's farm, almost on the very day of his twenty-first year. How proudly he had barged into the new West, filled with a restless desire to prove that he could win a place for himself in a world of lusty men! Perhaps his sons had something of the same spirit. Handing them comfortable farms, adjoining his own, had not been the right course after all.

How strange a thing, human existence! he pondered wistfully. A man could see the right way of life only years after the time had gone. He thought of his own toil-filled years. Toil, because of his great ambition to make it easy for others, when they had not wanted it made easy. Now, at the very end of the long trail, there was no value in this new wisdom. Only a sense of futility that it should come so late.

He wondered how other fathers felt about these things. Sam Beeman's son had gone to a city, and young Scud Phinney had left so long ago it was hard to remember there had been such a person. The old Levi Phalen place and Herman Schaffer's

farm had passed to strangers. Perhaps he was not the only homesteader who had taken the wrong turning in the trail.

There were a lot of things to think about, to settle in his mind. A lot of things for a man who had so few days left for anything. Occasionally he thought of sending into town for the preacher, but somehow he had little confidence in the Reverend Clarence Dickie.

He wanted an older man, one who had felt the zero winds and the searing summers for a long time. It would be hard to talk to these youngsters who were sent out to the churches of the small prairie towns. What did they know of life, except from their reading of books? And yet they came as guides about life—future life.

That was something he felt could not be read from books. It would be a conviction, a summing up of experiences and observations, a knowledge of people that could not be learned from printed words. What would the Reverend Clarence tell him about the future?

A preacher had come from town at the time old Noah Barger had fallen under a load of hay. The preacher's name was forgotten, but Burl remembered how he had read a few verses about mortality and incorruption, and then he had offered a prayer. He remembered how he had peeped through his fingers as the young preacher prayed. The prayer was being read from a book. Perhaps there was nothing wrong in reading off a prayer, but somehow it had shaken his confidence.

If he could find an old preacher, one who had lived with the great lifting blizzards of January and the quick lightnings of midsummer, then he might talk with him. Such a man might have come to an understanding of things through a life with the sky and the earth and the long roll of the seasons. To a man of this kind he might confess about the girl named Ida.

He had asked himself a thousand times if Emma had known about this girl. In that strange spirit world, where preachers said so many things would be revealed, perhaps Emma knew now. And if she knew, would she hold it against him? For just

a little while, or always? These old haunting questions might be answered by one old enough to be wise in the ways of frail human nature. Or perhaps no one anywhere really knew much about such things. If Emma came to him some night in the darkness of the poplar trees, her coming might be the sign of forgiveness.

Again he pondered his one long-ago adventuring in the big town. The details came clearly, as they did about far-off events, while things of recent date became obscure and forgotten. Old Israel Bower, postmaster, justice of the peace, moneylender, notary, and general adviser on all human problems, had been slow in putting through the papers of a deed for land.

"Better run up to the city and get it straight at headquarters," Israel advised.

It was a slack season, if any season was slack on the Zither place. Only anxiety for his precious land made him resolve to go. Then the deed had been put in order, signed, and witnessed, and an afternoon and evening of idleness stretched before him.

It was a strange sensation to feel that he could not work, not even chore around; mend harness, fill grain bins, nail up nests for the hens. Nothing! He moved along with the crowds on the streets. Almost a sense of guilt came over him, to be loafing on such a fine day. He wondered vaguely how the people made the days pass without work.

After a time of aimless wandering he sat in a hotel waiting room. People passed and passed as if they could never finish going wherever they were bound. Not one familiar face! And back home everyone he met called out some word of greeting.

He pushed out into the evening crowds. Loneliness still oppressed him. He longed to see a single acquaintance. Anyone! Even if it happened to be anyone he usually did not care much about. He gazed in the shopwindows and at the people on the street and back to the windows again. Among all the thousands of things displayed he must find a gift for Emma. If only she had come with him, they could have talked about everything they saw. He had not thought about the possibility of her com-

ing. She had said nothing, but she might have been thinking about it. He regretted that in the hurry and worry of leaving he had not asked her.

In the midst of this thought the girl spoke to him:

"Hello! I guess you're Burl Zither."

He turned to stare at a large, handsome girl. "Yes, that's who I am."

"You don't remember me and you wouldn't if you tried. I was only a kid in school when I left."

"I can't just place you. I guess you've changed considerable. But I'd know your folks."

"Sure, you'd know them all right. If you want to call me anything, call me Ida. How's everything?"

"Bout the same."

"How's Harry Beeman and Jennie?"

"Jennie's married. Married Ed Graham, old Joe's son."

They wandered on, talking of people and events back home. The city had suddenly become a friendly place, its vast indifference fallen away.

"Say, you're hungry!" Ida remembered suddenly.

"Maybe I am. A man forgets regular mealtime away from home."

"Come on up. I live near here. I'll fix you some real food; food and drink."

Her offer had not seemed unusual at the time. People in the country always kept open house; friends were welcome, even strangers who happened along.

They walked up the three flights to Ida's suite. He tried to remember families whose children had left for the city. No doubt there were several; it was not easy to keep in mind all the youngsters of town and country.

The girl began opening cans, and whiffs of coffee came from an open door. They ate, still reminiscing of families and happenings in Ida's prairie town. Then he asked:

"And what do you do?"

"Everybody!" Ida laughed. "Except old friends, of course."

"Then I'm safe?" He marveled at his own expansiveness. At home he never chatted with light talk. People thought of him as stern, a man of few words. There was not often time for talk except in relation to work.

"Now a gloom chaser." Ida set out red-filled glasses.

"I guess I don't go in for that," he began to object.

"Aw, now, you're not to hold out on me! I'd be awfully offended."

He sipped the little glass. It might be years and years before he left the farm again. Ida was a fine girl, a really outstanding person. He must be pretty fine himself, or she would not bother with him so long. He sipped other little glasses. The world became a rosy, splendid place for high adventure. Ida sat on his knee.

In the morning came a confusion of memories; memories and regrets and vague apprehensions, all jumbled together as he moved toward the station. Then he met Andrew Lee and Rose. Somehow he was not glad to see them. But he said:

"Well! Didn't think I was going to see a soul I know."

"Kinda steppin' out on us, eh, Burl?" Andrew's thin laugh cackled.

He should have gone on, maintaining a show of dignity, but he waited to say:

"Can't step out much in this lonesome place."

"You don't seem to find it so lonesome! Come on, Andrew." Mrs. Lee's words were like the spitting of an angry cat. Andrew looked solemn as he followed her.

As the train roared over the familiar prairie Burl thought of Andrew, but, for the most part, of Andrew's wife. Undoubtedly they had caught a glimpse of him the night before, possibly as he moved along, oblivious of everyone but Ida, or even as he followed her up the stairway. He had not thought of caution, but even if he had, who would know him? How could anyone know that Andrew and his wife would choose that particular day for their city visit?

He and Andrew were officials in the same church. Rose was

a member of its women's societies. Then discovery of his sudden error held direful possibilities. Andrew could be discreet, if left to himself. But he would not be left that way.

All the way home he argued the matter with himself. What did they know? What did anyone know? Only what they could build up from their own imaginations. Had they recognized this Ida from the home town? Did they know her for what she was?

Sometimes he thought of telling Emma that he had met a girl from home. But it would seem odd not to know her name. The name she had given was more than likely not even partly right. No, one could not tell about an old friend without a name. He decided to say nothing.

At first there came over him a strange sacrilegious feeling as he went about his church duties, solemnly passing the collection plate, gravely standing in his accustomed place to greet the departing congregation.

Would the people want him there if they knew everything? He watched for slights and averted glances. Sometimes he was sure that his secret had been told. Month followed month, and he began to think his imagination had betrayed him into seeing what he expected to see.

The same doubts persisted when he thought of Emma. He had never spoken and she had not accused him. Often he was positive of reproach in her eyes. But a lingering doubt always sealed his lips. The years passed and Rose Lee and Andrew passed with them, and no man or woman had spoken of the girl called Ida.

4

THE OLD MEMORY RETURNED at odd times. One hot Sunday afternoon Fred and the Phinney boys had gone swimming in the

Big Slough. The boy knew that Sunday swimming was against his father's wish. Boys must be made to feel that Sunday was not a day for levity. Just what should be done with the long day, aside from church, had never been very clear. But there must be a strictness about it, otherwise the proper respect would not develop.

When Fred came from the Big Slough he was not met with harsh words, nor indeed with any words at all. It was possible to make grim silence more reproving than angry words.

The small boy felt the disapproval at once. He tried to carry on under the strained relations. But soon he stopped whistling; he began to tiptoe about the room and finally he curled up in a corner with a Sunday book. From time to time he glanced up fearfully, no doubt hoping that the crushing grimness had relaxed.

Then as Burl gazed at the uncomfortable small boy, suddenly he thought of Ida. Who was he, a mature man, to sit in judgment on the harmless play of a boy; he who had himself so greatly overstepped the mark?

With unaccustomed gentleness he spoke to Fred: "You better get out your bow for a while. Shoot behind the barn maybe."

Amazement spread over the face of the boy. Then he smiled. "Oh gee!" He knew that for some inexplicable reason his punishment was over.

Tears came to Burl's eyes as he thought of that long-ago Sunday afternoon. If only he had been able to hold those rare moments of understanding with his sons! But he had feared that indulgence might soften them, spoil them for later contact with the rough world. Perhaps if their mother had lived, a gentle hand to temper the discipline he imposed!

So many of his rambling thoughts led back to the old regret—no time for play! A few more dollars, wider acres, better barns, finer cattle—where was the real profit? If only he had taken Emma from the kitchen some afternoon down to the Big Slough when the boys were small! He might have helped them build their little raft and watched them pole it over the shallows.

It would have delighted them beyond measure. Or a longer jaunt some perfect Saturday, into the Sand Hills. How the boys would have gone wild exploring the mysteries of the dunes!

If only there were some way of starting again, far back; back before the trail took any sharp turnings. Perhaps in that mysterious existence to which the doctor had doomed him there would come new chances, one more chance with a knowledge of how to use it. Emma, Tom, and Fred, all of them playing together in some celestial Sand Hills!

He sat on, thinking and dreaming in the midsummer sun. At the far end of the long field Jim Yost raked hay, dumping the rake as it touched the end of each windrow. Some man Jim had hired forked the hay into neat, round cocks.

High in the northeast thunderheads piled, white and fleecy and dazzling. Against the clouds cranes floated, circling endlessly, their grating cries coming faintly through the still air. It was strange what business kept them turning and turning their high spirals until they became specks and then faded altogether.

He wondered a little sadly what Tom and Fred had thought about these mysterious birds. No doubt their boyish fancies had imagined all sorts of strange things. Boys were like that, trying to account for what they did not understand.

Sixty years ago he also had marveled at the prairie birds, at their variety and numbers. He remembered the plovers flying up from the lurching wagon. As they were about to alight again they always lifted their wings in a splendid arch.

Burl let his mind wander to the great geese migrations, the geese that Emma had hoped to follow South. How tremendous the vast armies as they gabbled against the spring winds or floated back through the gray autumn skies! They were nearly gone now, or else they had changed their line of march. Only a thin wedge or two passed high overhead where lines once had streamed beyond number.

They were like people in some ways, he thought whimsically. They pushed into a new land to find substance and rear a family. They honked their way North, full of noise and vigor and no

doubt feeling the urge of high expectancy. Then, with families matured, they drifted homeward through the sad, short days of waning sun. They were always so much quieter going back, it was easy to imagine them as disappointed with life, perhaps deserted by their families, seeking only warmth and ease for their winter of disillusion. He felt something of kinship with these experienced birds.

The autumn of the big fire the geese had not dropped out of the sky at all. They seemed to know that no sustenance remained anywhere in all the blackened waste of prairie. Looking at the fields and fences, the trees and the old farmsteads, it was hard to believe that once, from horizon to horizon, the whole country had been black as a crow's wing.

Emma was with him then, her first farm summer. He remembered how they stood, hand in hand, in the doorway of the new frame shack. They could see the line of fire spring to life in the gathering dusk. A thin line, hardly more than a faint glow in the west. Emma had been anxious, but with the coming of sunrise the fire seemed to die away.

In the afternoon the smoke thickened and he came in from the field. He plowed a wide strip around the house and around the four stacks of wheat, their first real crop.

Then the wind began, gusty at first, but growing to a steady lift. The creeping fire wakened to sudden life. Emma came out to the sod barn. They could hear the oxen inside, moving and restless.

"What'll we do, Burl? Can't I help?" She was trembling but not frightened for herself.

"Nothing to do but wait," he tried to assure her. "It'll burn up to the fireguards and then pass on."

It was not easy to just wait as the roar came down upon them from the great unsettled area to the west.

"I'll just soak these in case." He soused two old sacks in the water trough. "Wait here, Emma. I'll go out to the stacks; may be a spark."

He rushed to the stacks as if his presence could, in some

unknown way, ward off the red line. Even as he reached them the stack nearest the fire began to smoke. He leaped upon it, beating down savagely with a wet sack.

Almost before he finished a little flickering flame ran into the next stack. He grabbed the other sack and began flailing, breathing hard.

It was a wild battle, rushing from stack to stack. He knew Emma grabbed the dried-out sack and ran with it to the trough. She had one waiting for him to snatch as he fought from stack to stack and back again. Then he heard Emma's shrill warning:

"Burl! The house!"

He rushed, gasping and almost spent. Lines of flame sprang from the grass inside the fireguard as burning tumbleweeds rolled across the plowed strip. The summer-dried boards of the shack began to smoke. They burst into sudden flame before he could stumble within reach. He fell back from the growing heat.

He turned again to the neglected stacks. Zigzags of red ran up the smooth sides.

"I couldn't reach—high enough!" Emma sobbed beside him.

He picked her up, clinging and shaken, retreating into the sod barn. She lay on a pile of wild hay while he propped the door shut with a fork. Inside the thick sod walls the roaring was shut out entirely.

"Oh, Burl!" Emma wept. "I shouldn't have called you from the stacks! Now we've lost everything."

"Nobody could of done more." He strove to comfort her. "You tried too hard."

"I'm so sorry! I couldn't quite reach up. Oh, Burl, all your beautiful wheat!"

"You all right, Emma?" In the sudden frenzy of battle he had forgotten.

"I—J think so." But her assurance came in a whisper.

All night they spent in the darkness on the hay. Only the slow chewing of the oxen came out of the silence.

In the gray morning before sunrise Burl gazed upon a strange desolation. Perhaps it was like a calm sea, only instead of a blue expanse, all was black. Flat and black, without a stalk of growth or peep of life anywhere. When the sun came up, bleached buffalo bones showed white against the black.

"What's it look like, Burl?" Emma tried to smile from her nest in the hay.

"Just black, but don't think of it. I'll get you out of here."

"I don't think anybody can get me out now." There were tears on her cheeks, but her voice was brave. "I guess I've taken root in your prairie, Burl."

About noon Tom was born.

Emma refused to be moved to the nearest town, which was still not very near; or even to the Beemans' or Phalens', whose farms were on the eastern fringe of the settlement.

"I can't be running away for every little thing. If you can manage I can."

They had managed. Sam and Levi rode over the black prairie to see how they had survived. The men turned in, working night and day. They plowed shallow furrows along the edge of the Big Slough. The strips were cut into tough sods and a new shelter arose from the very heart of the prairie itself.

Jane, Levi's wife, stayed with Emma for a time, and then Elvira Minders came from across the river. The homesteaders gave generously of their slender stores.

"It's bad enough to marry a dirt farmer, without having to live in the dirt," he told Emma when they were settled.

"It's not dirt." Emma looked at the solid walls. "It's good clean prairie sod. A lot warmer than the house we lost."

Emma had always been like that, a grand soldier, never a complaint or a nagging word. She had been too willing, so willing that her strength had not equaled her stout spirit.

And the neighbors, too. It was pleasant to sit in the hot sun and think of the greathearted old-timers. No doubt they had faults, but it was hard to remember now what they were. They gave of their time and of their small possessions, with no careful

reckoning of a return. Where were there new men like Sam Beeman, Cephus Minder, and Heck Phinney? Like Levi Phalen, Joe Graham, and Herman Schaffer?

Did families lend a hand as in the early days? It was so very many years since he had needed that kind of neighborliness that he wondered about it. Yes, the old independence seemed to be dying out. Or was that just his own idea, because he was an old man and did not understand new times and modern ways? If a family got a bit down, it seemed no longer to be any concern of the neighbors. They knew no one would suffer, because the government kept all those who gave up trying. There had been no government to listen when his wheat and house had gone up in flames. When Levi Phalen lost all his horses with the glanders, or when a freak hailstorm pounded down every spear of Herman Schaffer's grain, they had no choice but to keep on. Here and there a horse had been found for Levi, and Herman had all the seed he needed waiting for him. In a year, or in two or three years, they had returned the loans and everyone carried on as always. Perhaps the new ways were more businesslike. No doubt the old-timers had not always got back exactly what they gave. They were likely to be careless about such things.

The sun began to lose its afternoon heat. Nearly everyone preferred the cool of evening, but Burl flourished in the full rays of midday.

"I guess I'm like an engine," he explained sometimes. "I go better when I'm warmed up."

He often thought that had his roots not struck so deep into the farm he would undoubtedly have followed the sun. Every year California, Mexico, Central America; on and on, until the sun began again its northern march. But the warm countries must remain forever a dream. He had always harbored a secret desire to see a banana tree. Somehow such a tree seemed symbolic of the greatest luxury of heat.

But now the sun was setting, his sun of life ending, for the most part, in unaccomplished dreams. Always a peculiar melancholy stole upon him at the setting of the sun. It was the kind

of haunting sadness that could be felt but not explained to another. A vague regret at the lack of accomplishment, a reminder of the shortness of life, a loneliness of the spirit—indefinable emotions that had no specific cause.

5

THERE WERE OTHER MOMENTS that were almost unbearably poignant. The falling of dead leaves, the swirl of drifting snow, the solemn wavering of northern lights—these were things of infinite import, releasing some deep spring of emotion. At long intervals he wondered if others were touched by these peculiar influences. Poets perhaps, artists and musicians and people like that, but not farmers and merchants and cattle dealers. The men who were often called “hardheaded.” And yet perhaps they might be going about their everyday work, filled with surges of emotion, and no one know.

Emma might have understood had she not gone away after a few brief years. He remembered now the almost mystical significance she felt about the birth of Tom. Long afterward people marveled and exclaimed over her experience the day after the big fire:

“But how could you? An infant in a barn with oxen and all that. Why, I never heard of such a thing!”

Then an odd look came into Emma’s eyes, as if she knew something that no one else could understand. But she only said quietly:

“Yes, it’s been done before. Once a long time ago—in a manger.”

The others slowly grasped her meaning and looked at her as if she might be a little queer. Yes, undoubtedly she had unusual expectations for her first-born. Perhaps it was just as well that

she had not lived to know of Tom's going. Or, if she had lived, he might not have gone. Life was full of "ifs" that could never be solved.

Burl moved slowly homeward along the maple road in the warm dusk. The trees met overhead. He liked to touch their solid trunks and remember when they had been thin whip stalks without a branch. He had hunted all along the river flats for straight young saplings. Trees were steadfast, enduring. They stayed by a man throughout a lifetime. Yes, they would even watch over him afterward, spreading their whispering arms above his last long resting place.

He reached the last of the trees, looking about carefully to see if Jim or Osa were in sight. Then for an instant he put his arm about the tree, his cheek touching its rough bark.

Surely a man who left such a living monument on the bare prairie had accomplished something! Memory of him could hardly perish utterly from the earth. Queer how people wanted to be remembered, as if it really mattered. And yet somehow it made the inevitable passing seem not quite so complete.

He went out from the shadows into the old farmyard. Overhead a nighthawk called and called and suddenly zoomed through the twilight. Osa saw him coming. She hurried along the path from the Little House. She greeted him as she bent over the stove:

"You have a good day, Mr. Zither?" She stirred something in a kettle.

"Pretty fair." Then he added a little sadly, "Doing nothing."

"What do you care?" Osa bustled cheerfully. "You've done enough for any three men."

"That's what worries me—knowing that it's all done."

Perhaps she did not understand. When she brought his warm plate to the table she explained:

"Chicken with dumplings, Mr. Zither. Is that all right? Here's an ear of sweet corn, not too old yet. You must tell me if there's anything you'd like, kind of special." She cut white slices on the old breadboard.

"Everything's fine, Osa. I'm still alive and you been cooking for me quite a few years."

"Twenty-three years last April, Mr. Zither. I was just telling Jim this morning. It was the year . . ."

But she did not finish. No doubt she remembered it was the year Fred had gone to the Great War. She poured the tea.

"Any time you want I should change to coffee, I don't mind."

"Guess I'll stay with tea, Osa." Emma had made coffee on Sunday morning as a special treat.

He sat on the bench at the back door where he could watch Jim's lantern bobbing about the barnyard. Inside, Osa put the kitchen in order, humming the same tune that always came into her mind after supper.

To the west heat lightning began flaring up from below the horizon. Emma had always tried to hide her terror when sudden storms swept across the prairie. Undoubtedly the storms could be terrifying to one not used to them. But they were not often really dangerous to human life, although a constant worry to farmers. The black heart of a storm sometimes let loose a burst of hail or a violence of wind, turning the grainfields to flat and soggy ruin.

Summer storms were fickle. Sometimes they gathered with dreadful menace, threatening to wipe out a wide path, only to veer suddenly or retreat without a blow. Or they might leap from nowhere, lashing the patient earth, flicking fiery tongues as they roared out their anger.

Osa had finished. She held the screen door a moment and let it close without slamming.

"Good night, Mr. Zither."

"Good night, Osa."

"Put the light in the window if you want anything."

It was the old formula. She went down the path to the Little House and Jim.

Burl sat on in the darkness, watching the flashes of light quiver along the horizon. Often such a beginning came to nothing. That's what he usually told Emma, trying to quiet her fears.

Once, while they were still living in the Little House, Emma had wakened him:

"It's going to be awful, Burl. The worst I ever saw."

He had roused from sleep after a long day in the harvest.

"It'll pass, Emma, don't you worry." But he got up to please her.

The house was stifling. Emma had closed the windows and door in fear of a draft which she always imagined might draw the lightning. Tom and Fred lay whimpering on a quilt in the middle of the floor, blinking in wonder at the midnight turmoil.

"Burl! Keep away from the stove!" He had gone to the water pail for a drink.

There was no denying the wildness outside. There was not an instant of real darkness or a moment of silence. The loose panes of glass vibrated, but no wind had come yet.

"Oh, Burl, don't stand in the window!" Emma had to shout through the splintering crashes.

The barnyard wavered in the ghostly light. A darting tongue touched a strand of barbed wire and a streak of flame shot far down the field. Balls of light sizzled from each barb and splinters flew from the posts.

"We can't live through it!" Emma screamed. "Save my babies!"

The babies were screaming, too, although hardly a sound could be heard from their wide mouths. It was strange how the mind worked at such a time. Burl could still remember how part of his mind seemed to be thinking whimsically that the storm was not altogether an evil, because the boys could exercise their lungs and nobody could hear them. It was like looking at a life-sized picture of crying children, but with no sound coming from them.

"Look!" He pointed to them and smiled, trying to subdue Emma's terror. "They're a new kind," he roared. "Soundless models."

Emma understood what he meant and perhaps she saw the funny side of it. She was able to quiet herself partly.

Then the wind burst upon them. It was a wonder how the little building stood up under the assault. He grabbed pillows from the bed and motioned Emma to press them against the window. It was an old prairie custom to prevent panes from being blown inward. Perhaps it helped some, perhaps not. At least it gave Emma something to do.

The house groaned and lifted and seemed about to roll before the wind like an uprooted tumbleweed. He seized the big oil lamp and turned it low, holding it ready to put out the instant he felt the house leave its foundation. Perhaps it had been a foolish idea, but he meant to prevent adding the danger of fire to whatever else might befall them.

Then came the crash of hail. An unguarded pane splintered and the white stones slithered across the kitchen floor. Emma seemed to be numbed beyond feeling. Her face was hidden in the pillows which she kept on pressing automatically against the window.

Suddenly the wails of Tom and Fred sounded loud and familiar. The storm had ended as if all the assaulting forces had given out on the instant. Emma dropped limply to the floor, gazing at the boys as if marveling that they had both been spared.

He opened the door. The roar of the retreating storm came from far in the east. The air was cool, almost cold. Rifts of hail lay in the hollows of the yard. He went out to the field with a lighted lantern. There was some damage but not a great deal. Anyway, the grain had been nearly all cut.

"I'm sorry I went to pieces," Emma said later. "But it was really bad, wasn't it?"

"Pretty bad for a few minutes," he agreed. "Might not be one like that for years."

"Maybe I'll get used to storms. I'll try."

"We'll build a big house," he promised then. "Solid; brick perhaps. Heavy beams and all that. One that can't shake in every wind."

After years of labor he had kept his promise. Emma had lived in her big house—only a single year.

It was queer how little things came clear again—clear as if they had happened yesterday. The boys now, yelling in the storm and no sound seeming to come from their round pink mouths. That was an odd thing to remember down the long years.

Tonight's storm was coming in a hurry. Thunder jarred and echoed down the long walls of cottonwood. The big trees seemed to give the thunder a hollow tone it did not have on the bare prairies.

He climbed the stairs and went to bed, still listening to the crackle of thunder that mingled vaguely with the memories of far-off storms. From his bed, facing the window, he could see the farm buildings flash out in the blinding glare and sink into darkness again.

Strange how indifferent a man—at least an old man—became to things of danger. This lightning, now, he thought quietly, might so easily touch him. Just a touch and he would be no more trouble to anyone, not even to himself. If, by lifting a hand, he could ward it off, he knew the hand would not be lifted.

Perhaps it was a good thing, a kindness of nature, really, that the wild desire to live became less and less with the years. It was like the gradual dying down of a fierce fire. When it came time to put out the fire entirely there would not be much left to protest. Just a final ember to flicker and go cold.

6

THE ROLL OF THUNDER reminded him of Fred, because Fred had heard something like that on the battlefields across the sea. He wondered if Fred had been frightened in the crash of battle.

Perhaps he cried out without sound, as he had on the kitchen floor as a child.

He had looked forward to asking Fred all about these things, how he felt, what he thought about, his reaction afterward—the whole cycle of a great battle. Fred might not have told him. Few of the soldiers who came back seemed to care about talking. They wanted to forget.

At least Fred would have told him all about the sea; how it felt to have no land in sight, how high the waves got, did he see a whale, an iceberg. Yes, a thousand things they might have talked about, if Fred had come back.

Somehow, after Fred left, a new insight had come to him, a sort of plan or resolve as to how they would become the friends they should have been long before. His youngest son had always seemed but a boy, with a boy's foolishness and inexperience. No doubt he had plans and opinions and ideas about life. They should have talked about these things. He meant to, of course, as soon as Fred had become a man. But the boy had gone and the man had not come back. Or perhaps a man had gone and been unrecognized.

Fred had talked about fighting for his country and ending all wars and a lot of things like that. But somehow it was hard to believe that Fred had not seized the chance to leave home more to find freedom for himself than for any country.

Other sons had gone, of course. Perhaps Fred's going had been partly because people expected him to go. There had been no talk before Fred said:

"I'm off next week." They were in the dusk of the barn, milking. No doubt it was an easier thing to say when they could not see each other's faces.

"Off where?" He knew by a sudden let-down feeling where Fred meant to go, but he pretended not to know.

"You know." The boy's voice was rough, but he did that to hide his emotion. "WAR!" He blurted it out quickly, as if he felt afraid to say it.

They milked on for a time, their streams burring into the pails

like a duet. Perhaps the boy thought he should offer to enlist but hoped he might be persuaded to stay.

"You're my only son. You can't go!" It seemed harsh in the quietness of the barn. It hadn't been meant as a command. He wanted to say: "You're my only son, all I have left. I love you and I can't let you go. I've no interest in living if you leave. Everything is yours. Take it and stay."

But he had not been able to say it like that. They had never talked to each other in such a way.

"I've joined up," Fred said at last. "I guess that settles everything."

"I'll get you off. They can't take the only son I've got left."

"But maybe I want to go." There was so much determination in the young voice that argument seemed hardly worth while.

Somehow they kept on milking, just as if the plans of a lifetime had not suddenly fallen to bits. It seemed as if they might as well empty the pail on the floor and never do another turn. But, like insects, they kept on automatically with their evening chores, doing them because they had done them so many times before. They seemed to avoid each other, working at opposite ends of the big barn. Still, it was not possible just to let things go like that. In the kitchen lamplight he said to Fred:

"What you want to go for?"

"Country, of course." He still held stubbornly to that as his reason. "Got to fight Germans."

"Germans! You mean like Herman Schaffer? Nobody could be a better neighbor than Herman."

"Herman's all right."

"And Karl Muller and Lud Ritter and August Kratz? What's the matter with them? They're Germans."

"They're Germans," Fred admitted. "But I'm going anyway."

There wasn't much to say after that. The thing seemed to be settled beyond argument. They spent the remaining days almost without talk. A brief word of the work in hand was all they could manage.

The twenty-fifth of April was Fred's last day. In the morn-

ing he said nothing. They went about the early work in the barn as if they expected to spend all their days together. Perhaps Fred had changed his mind and they could go on and on without separation. He put down a saucer of milk for the old white cat and harnessed the team for work in the fields. Surely he could not do these little things if his mind was filled with thoughts of war!

But suddenly he was gone from the barn. He did not come into sight again until he came through the kitchen door and stood on the back porch. He looked all around, taking a long time, as if trying to imprint on his memory the fields and trees and paths and gates he had touched so many times.

He must pass the barn on his way to the town road. He must stop for a last word. But he did not! He climbed through the hedge and went out by the side gate. Perhaps it was better so.

The boy looked back and waved to the man watching in the barn door. They waved to each other almost frantically. But they were at too great a distance for words. Yes, perhaps Fred's way of going had been best.

He did not leave in anger. That had been a comforting thought down the long years. Almost as he passed from sight behind the trees he had turned for an instant. His hand brushed his eyes. The slight motion was unmistakable. There had been tears in those eyes! No, he had not left in anger. Deep in his foolish, obstinate, loving heart there had been affection. A real feeling for his father standing in the barn door, no doubt obstinate and foolish too.

For twenty-three years the glimpses of Fred dashing the tears from his eyes had been a gleam of hope, never quite dead.

Fred and his battles, his Germans and his great guns, mingled with the crash of summer thunder, so that the battle became thunder and the thunder merged into a dim battle of long ago.

7

IN THE MORNING Burl moved under a tranquil sky. It was four months now since his span of life had been officially limited. He felt little physical difference; his step a bit slower, perhaps, his back more bowed.

But his mentality, he knew, had changed. A year ago his mind had teemed with the details of daily work. He planned and directed the whole round of operations. He worked out a change in cultivation that would take five years to complete. He spent days calculating the possible purchase of another piece of land, as if he could extend his plans into an infinity of time.

Now a curious apathy had changed all that. There was an almost constant dwelling in the days of the past. He marveled at first that he should be so indifferent whether Jim filled the east end of the haymow before he filled the west, whether he stacked the oats on the left or right side of the barn. There seemed to be no importance in these things any more.

His mind constantly formed problems from the events of years ago. Should he have given the boys the twin calves they wanted for their very own? Emma had mildly hinted how happy Tom and Fred would be with such an interest. He thought they were a little young for the responsibility, but he had meant to talk to them about it. Spring came on with a rush that year, and he forgot the calves. No one had asked him a second time.

Too bad he had neglected a thing like that. Now it assumed more importance than a decision to buy another farm or build a new barn. Events that evolved later might have arranged themselves in an entirely new way had the incident of the calves been reversed. What happened to the calves? Of their ultimate fate he had no slightest remembrance.

Little things kept bobbing up from a long while ago. The time

when Tom wanted a day to go fishing. Boys had discovered minnows in a creek running into the river. It was a long distance and they planned on a whole day. The chance to fish on the prairie was so unusual that Tom was tremendously excited. But it was in the very midst of the haying season and the weather might break any day.

"You can go," Tom was told, "if you can find somebody to take your place."

At four o'clock in the morning—or maybe it was nearer three—he galloped frantically to the neighbors round about. But they were all busy with their own hay. Then Tom had rushed to the village. There seemed to be no man anywhere, at least none willing to spend a hot day in the field. Tom came home tired and resentful.

There followed a long, silent day in the hayfield, with Tom brooding and angry. He jabbed the fork into the big gobs of hay, his face stern and red.

At the time there seemed no argument at all in favor of stopping the hay harvest to go fishing. With the wheat already beginning to turn, taking a day off seemed the height of foolishness.

And yet? Burl remembered seeing old Butch Hodgins, the town loafer, and his son Brick starting off with their rusty guns the first warm spell of spring.

"They're goin' out to the Sand Hills fer a week," Israel Bower, the venerable postmaster, explained. "Shiftless cuss, Butch. Never had a hundred dollars in his life." Then Israel had scratched his head as he gazed after the ragged couple. "I dunno, Burl, maybe they're right."

"They might be at that," Burl remembered himself answering. At least old Butch still had his son with him. They seemed to get a lot out of life, in their shiftless way.

"I'd do it!" Burl said aloud. "Next time I'd do it."

Of course he had meant to play. When the boys were secure and Emma settled in the Big House, then they could all take days off together. But they never had.

It was like Israel said: "Queer there's no second chance fer us old coots. We gotta wait fer the New Jerusalem."

Somehow the expression reminded him of Emma. He decided to go out to the cemetery back of the town and look once more at Emma's grave. It was one of those soundless days of mid-summer when not a blade of grass moved and the roadside weeds were limp with heat.

The graveyard straddled a gravelly ridge with cultivated fields touching its borders on all sides. "It was no good for grain," Burl thought grimly. "So we gave it to the dead." Had all the land been fertile in the wild wheat-growing area, it was a nice question where a resting place could have been found for those whose fields had already whitened unto the harvest.

"We were crazy about wheat!" he thought sadly as he moved along the road to the sagging gate.

On the dry ridge the grass was already turning yellow. Not many bothered to cut the grass, especially on the mounds that had been made a long time ago. Tumbleweeds hung on the fence wires and gophers burrowed everywhere.

He sat down to rest beside the stone:

EMMA ZITHER

1865-1898

*If in this life only we have
hope in Christ, we are of all
men most miserable.*

That was the verse Emma had wanted. The words were not easy to understand. Sometimes they seemed to mean that she was disappointed with life, and this was the only way she had managed to tell him. But it did not seem like Emma to be that way. In a sense she had everything; far more than most farm wives. She had all the big things, although, no doubt, she had been disappointed in small ways.

That was the hard part of life—who could know at the time what really counted? As he sat in the heat listening to the whirr

of grasshoppers through the dried grass, he remembered something Emma might have counted as of real importance:

It was in the late fall after the end of harvest. A famous singer had come to town, some woman with a foreign name. Emma did not ask for very much, but this seemed to be something special. He promised her. He would listen, too, although foreign singing did not mean a lot to him as it did to her.

In the early morning he had gone with Sam Beeman and Heck Phinney to round up the cattle in the summer pasture on the flats across the river. There was no bridge yet. They spent hours forcing the stubborn animals to swim the river. Then the slow march home through the fields and the cold darkness. Before the cattle were safe in their home barns it was almost midnight.

Emma had a hot supper waiting. It was queer how he could remember about that. Perhaps because he had been so wet and cold. She had fried potatoes and ham, wild raspberries and johnnycake, and the coffee she always called a treat. After the long day's struggle he almost fell asleep on his feet.

There must have been something important next day, at least something that seemed important then. He had not thought about Emma's music and she did not say anything. That was like her, not to talk about what had passed. Then he saw a piece about the concert in the weekly paper, and he remembered. He felt mean about it. Emma had made a special dress from something she had kept folded in her trunk a long time. He wanted to tell her how sorry he was. But she had seen him reading the paper. She would know he remembered only because of the paper. It was a hard thing to talk about. He promised himself to make it up to her with something big. He wondered now if she had ever put on the fluffy dress.

He sat on in the sun, bits of talk and old scenes running through his mind. Emma telling him how smart Tom was at school. Emma holding up her apron full of eggs; darning in the lamplight, picking black currants, putting a pail on the pump spout.

He got up slowly, tottering a moment on his cramped legs.

Before he went down the little hill he would read the old head-stone names. The names made almost a complete roll call of the early settlers; nearly all except himself and Israel Bower and Butch Hodgins. The three of them were the last sere leaves still hanging to the tree.

He remembered as a boy how he had avoided graveyards. Even in daylight he had not willingly passed in sight of the white stones. There was no reason for it, at least none that he could remember, perhaps just a natural shrinking of youth from any reminder of mortality. But no such repugnance possessed him now.

He wandered to the mounds where rested Sam Beeman and Lizzie. Then Heck and Sarah Phinney and Levi Phalen with Jane. These three families had been his nearest neighbors, almost from the beginning. Countless times they had lent each other a mower, a hayrake, a sledge, a load of hay, a sack of seed, a side of pork—there was almost nothing they had not shared in those earliest years.

They were grand people, perhaps made a little more perfect through the haze of distance, but still the salt of the earth at any time. In the hard winters of '81 and '82 they had gone out to the river flats together for loads of willow brush. It was their only fuel except twisted hay, and hay seemed too precious to burn.

They had used his oxen and Sam's sleigh. Heck had the only gun among them. The gun was important then. It meant bush rabbits and prairie chickens added to the dry bannocks and boiled potatoes. Once in a series of blizzards they had shared their last sticks of wood. They had even divided a rabbit. There had been times when all together they could not have raised a dollar. But they could sit up with each other night after night through a siege of sickness. They could read scripture verses beside an open grave before the coming of a preacher. These were things that knit into the fabric of life, things that the years could not dim.

They had never talked a great deal, even in their closest years. It was queer about that. Not much news trickled in to make

talk, or perhaps each knew the opinions of the others anyway. Sometimes Heck came into the yard at sunrise:

"You got anything in the shape of 'taters, Burl?"

It was uncertain whether he came to borrow or lend. Somehow it never seemed to matter much in those years; each prospered only in the prosperity of all.

Or Sam might come smacking against the door long past the bedtime of most farmers:

"Any doggone son of a seagull to home?"

"That you, Sam? What's happened?"

"Not a thing. Just passin', just passin'." He always said that, even when he made special trips. "How you fixed fer bucksaws, Burl?"

"Just got one, Sam. You'll find it on the woodpile."

"Too bad! Too bad! Now we both got one."

Then he faded into the night, disappointed. He had come offering to lend his saw, but now they each owned one. They had been getting prosperous then.

Queer how the old times came back, even the very words of Levi and Heck and Sam. He could see Sam as if he had talked with him yesterday. He could see him standing with his thumb caught in his vest, shutting one eye and looking up at the sun. Whenever he was asked a question Sam always squinted up at the sky, as if he had to calculate the weather before he could give an answer.

He read the stone again:

SAMUEL BEEMAN

1858-1932

He sleeps well.

It was an odd thing to say that about Sam. He was never much of a hand to sleep, always used to be prowling around in the night as if he could hardly wait for sunrise. Yes, perhaps now he had found the sleep he had been too busy to find before. Still, he would not be entirely comfortable unless he could take

a quick skyward squint before answering the questions of heaven.

"Wherever he is," Burl thought whimsically, "I'd like to be with him."

He moved on across the ridge of mounds. Here was Cephus Minders and Andrew Lee. Noah Barger and Herman Schaffer. Good farmers, all, but of a later day than the others. Elsa, Herman's wife, had been Emma's closest friend.

Then came two or three little wooden slabs, almost weathered black. The dates were gone but the names still held:

PEHR RIVKIN

LEO CHEVOKA

They were the two Russian partners who had made the rough boots for the pioneers. The great heavy boots that plodded the new sod furrows or broke the crust of January drifts. When store boots came in, the business of the little partners dropped away almost to nothing. Somehow they never seemed quite able to understand what had happened, and they, too, had dropped away to nothing.

RISTO KOSOLA

Here lay the Finlander who peddled fish every winter. Great whitefish and pike which he brought down from some far northern lake, were frozen solid like cordwood and piled in his high sleigh box. His red oxen swung slowly from farm to farm, the sleigh creaking with the heavy load. His yearly visit brought to the prairie farmers their only contact with what they called "sea food."

They bought the Finlander's fish and buried them in snow-banks. One by one, as needed, the fish were dug out and thawed in a tub of cold water. Young Tom and Fred had been tremendously excited every time a fish was dug from the snow. They gazed in awe at the round, staring eyes. They could hardly believe that fish attained such a size.

It was a strange fate that overtook Risto Kosola. Yes, there

was something peculiar about it, that after freezing so many thousands of fish he should himself be frozen. After the great storm of '89, Andrew Lee found him near the old Barger place. Elvira Minders, who did not like the Finlander's wares, declared that the combined vengeance of his countless victims was more than Risto could stand. It was bound to get him down in time. Elvira had queer ideas about religion. She really knew nothing about such things; still it was an odd fancy she had. There had never been another fishman.

Burl moved on over the ridge. Here was old Esther Snodgrass, whose young husband had run off with the Jennings girl. Esther lived to be ninety-four, the greatest age in the whole countryside. She made a potent liquor from sugar beets and smoked an ancient pipe. After her desertion by Henry no woman ever spoke to her. She was the terrible example held up by mothers as a warning to their daughters.

"Funny about her age," Israel Bower said once. "I guess she was so pickled and smoked she kind of preserved herself like a ham."

At the funeral the preacher had read a chapter or two. Nothing more. It would have been difficult to preach a sermon for riotous old Esther Snodgrass.

He moved on down the slope, pausing to read of Unity and Serena Beidler, the twins who stitched endlessly on the dresses and hats of town and farm women. No one had ever caught a glimpse of them without their flying needles. They seemed to work in a kind of harmony, like violinists on an eternal duet.

"Maybe they're still at it," Burl speculated. "Angels' robes or something." They would be unhappy manipulating strange harps.

Alonzo Harkness and Lydia, his wife, side by side at last. Behind Alonzo's harness shop they had lived for years without speaking. No one knew the cause of their vow of silence toward each other. They spoke only through the medium of a great gray cat, one Thomas Henry by name.

"Thomas Henry," Lydia would shrill, "bring me a side of

pork from Eby's market; not too fat." And Thomas Henry would blink from his window in the sun, secure in the knowledge of his inestimable value.

Alonzo gave no indication that he heard, but shortly thereafter the pork was delivered to the Harkness kitchen.

Thomas Henry also deserved a record in stone. No doubt he had passed long ago, his nine lives all spent in matchless diplomacy.

On down the slope: Rachel Bayard, John Shattuck, Henry Stubbs, and Malvina Helland. All in a row, and all waiting. Waiting! Waiting!

Burl looked back from the gate. What were they all waiting for? The last trump, the preachers said. But that didn't mean anything. Nothing a man could really make sense out of.

Were these sleepers on the hill waiting for some soul-shaking moment in an incredibly distant future that would waken them into sudden activity? Or did each go about his own ghostly business from the instant he shuffled off mortality? The preachers never explained.

The sun dropped low, a red ball. A sudden breeze stirred the dried stalks into a sad whispering. Burl turned into the highway. He would not come here again. It was not here he would find Emma. He could not remember that she had ever come to this ridge in her lifetime. She would know nothing about this lonely, unkept spot. If Emma could be met anywhere, it would be in the midst of her poplar trees. She had loved their whispering voices. He moved into the sunset, his back turned to the stones on the hill.

8

IN THE MORNING Jim Yost and his men began on the wheat harvest. The high spots were yellow, while the damp places

were still green. One had to strike an average as the fields ripened. Jim knew how to judge these things, with his twenty years' experience on the Zither farm, and other years before that in Norway. He was the kind who sent his roots deep into the land. He never bickered about wages or time off.

Others often asked Burl how he managed to keep Jim and Osa year after year.

"I guess it's because I don't try to keep them," he explained. But he knew they did not altogether grasp what he meant.

It was strange the way they had drifted into a kind of vague partnership. There was a rugged honesty about Jim that he had discovered years ago. They had not talked about money for a long time. A joint account had been arranged. When Jim took in cattle or hogs to market, or Osa her eggs and turkeys and butter, they put the amounts into their account.

"Take whatever you need," he told Jim and Osa as they sat in the kitchen. Jim went out suddenly, but Osa thanked him with tears in her eyes.

"It's too much for Jim to talk. He thought he would cry like me, so he goes out," Osa explained simply. "We never leave you, Mr. Zither, long as you want us."

Their wants were few. They were devoted to the welfare of the farm and all it contained. They drew less money than if they were working for wages. But they knew it was there, waiting for them any time. In good years they sent a little to someone in the old country.

"It's Jim's sister," Osa said once. "She never got married, and she's kind of old now."

"Don't let her be hungry, Osa," he had approved. "The farm has plenty."

No farmer had been able to induce Jim Yost to leave the Zither acres. They had offered fantastic wages to no avail.

"How does Burl tie up his help? He's a shrewd old boy." They marveled at the loyalty of Jim and Osa.

It was not shrewdness, but Burl never explained about that. It was really an experiment. When Fred had left and no relative

remained anywhere, there had been long and bitter battles with himself. He had been a driver, an arranger of other people's lives. But other people refused to be arranged. His own sons, inheriting something of their father's iron will, had rebelled. Emma had submitted. Disaster resulted either way.

People were individuals, independent beings who thought and planned and made mistakes and went on again. They did not like to have the way mapped out for them by experience. They wanted their own experience. Tom and Fred should have been allowed to make mistakes. Even if their small plans had cost a little, what difference? But they had gone, resenting the fancied hardness of their lot.

All this did not come in a day, a week, or a month. It was the slow growth of many a sad session with himself. He resolved to try the new way with Jim and Osa. At first they were only a strange hired man and wife; whatever happened would not matter greatly. They seemed like an upstanding couple, with habits of industry. No doubt they had been told by others that old Burl Zither was a hard man. But they had come to him in a bad season and he filled their hours with labor. From sunrise till darkness he had a plan for each of them. They did not complain.

He still remembered Jim's surprise as he began the new way: "Which field I do next, Mr. Zither?"

"The field next the Big Slough." Then he remembered his new plan. "But what you think, Jim?"

The man had been too surprised to answer at once. He gazed as if he could not be quite sure that he saw his old master. Then he said:

"Maybe the field by the maples be more ripe."

They examined both fields. Jim was right. His field needed cutting first.

The evolution of direction was not easy. Jim made mistakes, not many, and not the same one twice. But finally it became almost a habit to say: "Whatever you think, Jim." And the man had expanded into a marvel of energy.

With Osa it had been the same.

"How many Leghorns I raise, Mr. Zither?"

"As many as you like. They're yours, Osa. If you want ducks and geese, we'll get some."

She had revived the neglected poultry business to unheard-of prosperity.

"Tom and Fred might have done that," Burl thought. "Not with the skill of Osa, perhaps." But they would have had a wonderful time had he given the chicken business into their hands. How they would have planned and worked, wasted lumber and spoiled eggs and started afresh; building, scheming, tearing down, and doing it all over again!

All the way out to the field to watch Jim cut the first wheat he kept murmuring to himself: "I didn't know! I didn't know!"

To Burl the harvest was always more than just a harvest. It was a fulfillment. The climax of a cycle whose recurring wonder never grew dim. More than sixty times he had watched the hard winter fields mellow and grow green, wave like sea billows, and finally yellow into the harvest.

There was something about the endlessness of earth's production that awed him. He felt it but he could not talk about it. The occasional years of prairie drought had nothing to do with the general plan. The ignorance of farmers or their greed might hamper the benevolence of mother earth for a period. But in the long roll of time, mistakes would be forgotten. He had read of old countries—England, Denmark, France—where land had been farmed for centuries. It was still yielding; yielding more than ever before.

No, the prairies were not to blame if they faltered at times. They needed to be understood, to be treated with affection. He, Burl Zither, had tried, in his brief span, to do that. Men said he was lucky, that he owned the best acres in the country. Perhaps he did, but it had not always been so. At first the endless grassland had all been very much the same. The later inequalities reflected the methods of various owners.

His own case now: In a sense, he had been lucky as people

said. In the beginning he had not thought much about the value of trees. But it happened that he liked them. He wanted to feel great masses of trees growing up around him. In a vague way he felt that trees would perpetuate something of himself, far on in years that he would not see.

The trees had returned his care many times over. They broke the searing winds and diverted the dust clouds. In winter they held great banks of snow. In summer they oozed moisture slowly from their spongy floor.

Suddenly he decided to see his one oak tree. He pushed through a fringe of willows and down the long cottonwoods that divided the fields like a wall. Then in through a sprinkling of birch and ash and finally the lone oak.

He felt the roughness of its trunk and gazed upward through the stiff arms. Yes, it was flourishing, here in the midst of the little forest. But still it was not much of a tree. Twenty-three years it had stood here, ever since the spring Fred left. A long time, yet only a moment in the life of an oak. Perhaps when the other trees had matured and fallen this oak would still be in its lusty prime. When fields were forgotten, when buildings and headstones crumbled, the oak would be growing stouter. From generation to generation people would speak of the Zither oak.

It was foolish, of course, this vague yearning to be remembered. Perhaps he was growing childish, as people called the dodderings of an old man. But no one needed to know of the crumbs of comfort he gathered from his fancies. A man with so brief a time left for the great sky and the swinging sun had need of all the comfort he could find.

He passed slowly through the pasture, under the cottonwoods, and on to the edge of the field where Jim tinkered with the gadgets of the binder. Jim finished threading, poking the twine through the eye of the curved needle. Then he mounted the seat. As the great drive wheel rolled, the little cogs sprang into sudden motion. The canvas turned, the packers smacked the stalks together, the first sheaf dropped, and the new harvest had begun.

Burl sat on the sheaf and rubbed a head of wheat in the palm of his hand. He touched the plump, soft grains. Under the hot sun the grains would soon attain a flintlike hardness.

The noise of the binder grew faint as Jim edged along to the far end of the field. This was the high moment of the year toward which all effort tended, on which all hopes centered. Far across the great plains unnumbered children of mother earth awaited the beginning of harvest.

Burl remembered his earliest ten acres, cut to the slow swing of oxen. In a few years Emma had stood proudly as the first sheaves dropped to the brittle stubble. Later Tom and Fred dragged the heavy sheaves in a valiant effort to be men and help the stookers.

Long afterward, and even after Tom had left, Fred had caught a heron in the wheat. The big bird had been afraid to leave the shelter of the standing grain. As the uncut portion became smaller its hiding place dwindled until Fred saw it. The bird could not spread its great wings amid the thick grain. Fred caught it and, when the binder came around again, he had proudly displayed his capture, still half afraid of the long bill.

"Can I keep it? Can I make a yard for it?"

It was easy to remember the eager young voice as the boy stood with his arms wrapped around the bird. The wind blew like rain and a lot of the cut grain was still on the ground. It was foolish to take time off to play with a bird in the harvest season. Anyway, a wild bird like that would not live more than a few days in a small pen. He had told Fred to let it go.

The released bird stood for a moment, still not knowing it was free. Then it opened its great wings and slowly flapped along the ground, rising higher and higher and at last disappearing into the sun. Fred watched it until the last speck was gone. Then he turned back to the heavy sheaves as if something of himself had gone with the heron. Perhaps even then he began to plan for the day when he, too, would take flight from the fields which held him.

Jim came again to the near side of the field. He stopped the

machine to dig out the oil holes and apply the long spout of his can. It was good to sniff again the mingled smells of oiled wheels and twine and fresh-cut stubble. Jim's feet struck out from under the machine.

"How is it, Jim? Not so heavy this year?"

"No, not so heavy, maybe. But not light, either."

"Kind of average, eh?"

"Kind of."

"Well, average is not so bad."

"No, it's not so bad, Mr. Zither."

Jim wriggled himself out from the mass of wheels, his face already dust-lined and smeared with grease. But the lines were those of contentment, an age-old contentment. He was a man of the land, of generations who had found their life in love of the land. He nursed the fields with an endless patience, giving them rest when they needed rest, restoring to them their own again, brooding over them with slow paternal care.

"You're a good man, Jim." It was strange how he spoke out like that, without really meaning to say anything.

Jim turned slowly, surprised at the unusual words. Each knew how he regarded the other without the need of talk. Some strange deep feeling stirred them, a mystic understanding of the significance of harvest. Suddenly each put forth a hand; they met in a hard clasp. Then Jim sprang to his seat and the wheels whirled again.

9

THE SUN GLOWED in a haze of midday heat. The farm buildings seemed blurred and far away in the mellow light. From a pole beside the Little House hung a dark flag. It was Osa's signal to Jim to halt for dinner.

Emma had always waved a piece of something for the noon call. It was strange how little things like that persisted on a farm. No doubt they had not owned a watch in the early days. But always Emma had called him in the old way. There was something vaguely comforting in the thought that a thousand new inventions had not altogether overcome the old customs.

He remembered how once Emma had called him in the middle of the morning. She waved her flag in a frantic flurry. He unfastened the horses and urged them on, fearing some accident to Fred or Tom.

In the barnyard he noticed Indians squatted about the well. He did not bother about them; they were never in a hurry, anyway. In the house Emma almost fell into his arms.

"What is it, Emma? What's happened? Where's the boys?"

"There! I hid them there!" She pointed under the bed in the back room.

"What're they up to now?" He thought Emma had invented some new kind of punishment. "Did they do something?"

"Didn't you see?" Emma whispered. "By the well! I was so afraid—I made the boys hide. I thought they might— Oh, I thought everything."

"Those! You mean the Indians? Is that all?" It was hard not to laugh, but Emma's fear was very real.

"Yes, the Indians!" She still whispered as if she thought of tortures and scalping.

"Never worry again," he urged her. "We missed the wild days by years and years."

"But the feathers! The paint! I thought it was war paint."

"Just an old custom," he quieted her. "I'll see what's going on." He strode out into the yard.

A wide circle squatted, patient and stolid, about the well. A few of the old men still wore traces of paint and feathers. Not for years had they come so far south of their reservations. They were not on the warpath—only hungry.

He gave them a sack of old potatoes left over from the spring planting. He carried out pans of skim milk and the bread Emma

had left from her last baking. The Indians nodded, grunted, and shuffled about. In an hour they drifted away and never came again.

It was a long time before Emma could smile when he spoke of her "Indian massacre." At school she had been taught about the Indian wars, scalplings and torturing of missionaries. She did not feel really comfortable until the prairies were thoroughly settled.

Even one Indian disturbed her. Once when they still lived in the Little House an old Indian stumbled against the door in the midst of a long blizzard. For two days and two nights he sat on the floor without a word. He did not touch the food they put beside him, not while they watched him. But in the morning it had disappeared.

Although the old Indian was almost feeble, Emma could not sleep while he was in the house. Sometime during the third night the storm ended. The Indian must have gone forth in the darkness. In the morning he could not be found anywhere, and no news of him ever came to them again.

It was pleasant to sit in the sun on the soft green sheaves and dream of the land as it had been a long, long time ago. He sometimes wondered just what the Indians thought of the coming of the white race. Did they think the white man's life a great advancement on their old wild ways? Or did they regard the white man as foolish, with his settled life, his care and worry over a great mass of possessions, his whole life given to the getting of even more possessions? The stolid Indian did not say what he thought.

Years and years ago there had been rough, wet spots on the Zither farm and on nearly every farm. The homesteaders called these hollows and humps buffalo wallows. Here, in the fly season, the buffalo herds came to roll and coat themselves with protective mud. The old wallows had long been leveled into cultivated fields.

Before the coming of the first settlers the living buffalo had

all gone, leaving only their wallows and their paths and their white-bleached bones.

But, sitting quietly on the very spot where the herds had rolled, Burl liked to dream of the great scenes he had come too late to see. He could imagine the huge, shaggy beasts, maddened by flies, rushing into the shallow sloughs. Acres and acres of rolling, wallowing monsters, churning the cool mud into hills and hollows. It was easy to believe that the whole swamp shook and quivered, perhaps like a battlefield under a rain of shells.

Did any white man ever come upon such a sight? Doubtless the Indians had watched the wallowings many a time. Perhaps when the animals were intent in their mud baths the Indians stole upon them. What a sudden uprising of dripping, terrified monsters, bellowing and fighting their way to firm ground! The Indians on their swift ponies, shrilling their hunting cries; the thundering stampede, the rolling dust, the zing of arrows—all sweeping across the plains in a mad, grand surge of battle!

Whenever the old pictures drifted through his thoughts Burl was filled with a profound regret that he had missed it all. He marveled at himself. Sometimes he seemed like two men. One part of his nature settled and respectable, a lover of trees and permanence; the other longing for the sweep of a wild, free life, the savage joy of slaughter.

A generation or two earlier he might so easily have become the wandering hunter. It was queer about that. Perhaps just below the respectability of all men there lurked an old savagery. Only a thin layer of civilized custom covered the age-old primitive man. And sometimes the savagery stirred underneath and almost broke through.

He mused on these things as he walked in the shade of the maples, the oldest of all his trees. The steadfast trees he loved, the wild life he had missed. Too bad life was not indefinitely long, on and on through all the phases of man's desire. Only one life, one life all but spent.

Afternoon silence had settled over the farmyard. No doubt

the geese had gone to guzzle in the slough. The turkeys were black dots bobbing for grasshoppers on the new stubble field. Only the hens stood idle, their wings held out from their hot bodies. Butterflies hovered above Osa's row of sunflowers.

Osa came out from the kitchen of the Big House:

"There's some cool buttermilk for you, Mr. Zither."

He didn't care much about buttermilk, but he knew Osa thought it was good for him. "Coming, Osa."

"Maybe you should rest, Mr. Zither, or walk in the shade only."

Yes, Osa meant well, but somehow she could not understand that he liked the hot feel of the sun.

"Here's the paper, Mr. Zither. Came this morning only."

He sat on the back porch and Osa brought him the buttermilk.

The paper flared with black headlines. There were millions of men across the seas marching against other millions of men. Warships were steaming, waiting. Death fell from the air on women and children. Men screamed hate against countries which defied them.

Burl folded the paper again. Was this the world that Fred had gone away to save? The same old hatreds and suspicions met the same old trickery and defiance. Nothing had changed. Millions of men—young men like Fred—lay in millions of graves, and still nothing had changed.

The paper told about different peoples. They were so terribly sure they were right and their enemies wrong. They had special meetings in their churches. They prayed to a great Being who must be in a whirl of confusion through their diverse prayers. For each people there seemed only one right way—their way.

The world would have been just the same if Fred had not gone. And Harry Beeman and Scud Phinney, Ed Graham and Johnny Lee, and a thousand thousand other farmers' sons had helped not at all. He put the paper behind the wood box. Perhaps it would be better not to read another paper. Perhaps it would be better not to live through another world hatred.

He let himself slowly down the steps and out into the yard again. The sun might draw depression from his mind as it drew water from the earth. In the still air the great barn and the sheds, the pens and coops and stacks stood, as if some giant artist had painted them into a scene of peace. How secure they seemed, as if only the slow wearing of time could ever touch them.

Burl contemplated the familiar scene in a new way. Other farmers were not secure. The papers told of desolation in Spain and of the vast ruined areas of China. There were hundreds, thousands of farmyards in these countries whose peaceful owners had no thought of war. But suddenly the whole countryside would flame into a blackened ruin, perhaps leaving no more than the prairie fire had left in the early days. It was hard. It was unspeakable! The papers explained how the farms in the old countries belonged to the same families for generations. They would have no words for their despair. He could not shake the depression from his mind.

In the coolness of the big barn he moved on to a kind of leftover corner near the loft ladder. Here he had gathered a few old things that no one but himself ever moved or touched. Hanging from pegs by their handmade rings were neckyokes, whiffletrees, and plow handles. He had made these things out of ash cut from the river flats. He touched the rough, unpainted surfaces and remembered the nights of slow labor that had gone into their shaping. Such things could not be bought in the beginning. Later the factories sent their bright-painted products to every prairie town and time became too precious for hand-made tools.

But there was something about these old things more than the memories they stirred. A kind of honesty and independence that one felt but did not talk about. Sam Beeman and Heck Phinney would have understood, but not Dr. Prentiss or Rev. Clarence Dickie.

A strange wooden frame hung in the farthest corner. It was the elm bow that once yoked the red oxen. In hunting for ash

handles he had come upon this twisted bit of elm, a natural yoke waiting to be taken.

He took down the old wood and laid it across his knee. It was the most cherished of all the collection. Joined thus, the oxen had pulled as one animal. Somehow they seemed more than just oxen; Buck and Bright, the only living companions of the first years.

Horses were taken into battle, but never oxen. They were great only with the land, symbolic of man's earliest struggles with frontiers everywhere. Awkward and slow, they were tireless because of their very slowness.

Burl smoothed the worn curve with his hand. Queer to think that this bit of wood had gone with him on the long treks before the coming of the railway and the town. He could hear yet the clicking of the wide horns as the oxen followed the winding trail. He could see again the frosty stars and feel the lonely winds whispering across a land where no light twinkled a welcome.

The oxen swung on and on. He dozed a little. He roused himself and swung his arms. He walked awhile to limber himself. Then the creaking of the wagon ceased and the oxen were unyoked. Beneath the wagon he rolled himself in a blanket, listened briefly to a faraway coyote, and, to the measured chewing of Buck and Bright, he faded into sleep.

Of those earliest years only himself and the old yoke were left. Soon—very soon now—it would hang from its peg, and no one would know why. No one would know what it meant or perhaps even guess its use. In the years to come someone would carry it out with the other old stuff to be destroyed in a spring cleanup.

"I don't know what this thing is," someone would say. "Sort of a contraption the old man made." No, they wouldn't understand. Even if he told them with words, they still wouldn't understand.

He had never told Tom and Fred why he valued the elm yoke. He had meant to tell them sometime; tell them of the long

trails, the blizzards, the seas of grass, the northern lights, and, most of all, of the great oxen swinging through the heat and the cold, and no complaint in their mild eyes. No, he had never come to the point of telling his sons how he felt about those years. They might have thought he harbored a soft spot somewhere, and he did not want them to think that. He wanted them to think of him as practical, efficient, just, and infallible. Yes, that had been his desire—a long time ago.

He wondered now how the boys would have carried on had they too been pushed out to try themselves in a new land. Would they have stood up to the hard years? The lonely years? Would they have felt the surge of freedom, the lift to drive them through to a victory over the land and over themselves? He might have said to them:

“Here’s a team and a wagon and my blessing for each of you. Root or die!”

But he had not wanted it to be that way. He had struggled mightily to save them from the burden and the heat. And in struggling he had lost them! Somewhere the Bible said that whosoever lost his soul should find it. Had he been willing to lose his sons for a time, he might have had them at the last.

Thus ruminating on old glories and newer sorrows, he hung the yoke on its peg again. Jim and the men had come and the teams were at the water trough. The turkeys and geese were home from the fields and the sun was low.

IO

AS THE DAYS PASSED, the click of the binders came from the last fields and the reaping was almost finished. Everywhere, stretching out from the high rows of trees, stooks dotted the fields like a vast tented army. The trees were like walls, Burl thought, per-

haps like the walls of Jericho with an army camped round about. But the walls would not fall, only the leaves, and the army would be whisked away before the breath of autumn.

The thought of Jericho kept with him, and he brought out the Bible to read it again. This was the book Emma had read. She had little time for reading, but in the winter evenings, before the boys went to bed, he remembered how she read them the story parts. Emma was religious, not in a churchgoing fashion, but within herself, in a deep sort of way that strangers would never discover.

Emma never argued about her beliefs, never talked about them even, but he knew that she possessed unwavering faith, a kind of living immanence that one felt without the need of words. He had been the strict one, never an absence from church meetings, unwavering discipline for the boys, a hushed Sunday. All that had seemed important once, but slowly its value ebbed away, leaving but the rattling of dead bones. Once he had been secretly proud of his name, proud to be pointed out as the stoutest pillar of the church, the largest giver, the enforcer of discipline. Rules and observances were doubtless necessary, but a long life of them seemed to give but little satisfaction now.

Another longing took possession of him, the longing to find happy memories down the years. Joy! That was the one thing lacking. Perhaps the early training in his father's household accounted for a certain grimness with which he had always approached religious things. Warning against "making light of sacred things" had been his father's constant theme. He had tried to pass it on to the third generation, but only rebellion had come of it.

He took the Bible now and passed down the lane and out to the highway. "I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help." Queer how that verse kept in his mind year after year. There were no hills here on the prairie, but there were horizons.

Sometimes of a morning he had come alone past the farthest line of his own trees. When he felt low in his mind he came to see the sun burst above the horizon. "I will lift up mine eyes unto the sun," he murmured. In some strange way it had brought him strength many times. The morning after Emma's funeral, and after Tom had gone, and Fred, he came to renew himself with the sunrise.

He sat with his back against the last tree trunk in the row and waited. The glow from the unseen sun grew stronger. Burl remembered reading about the turning of the earth and its whirling through space at incomprehensible speeds. The marvelous thing was the certainty of it, and all the vast business without noise. The earth, sun, moon, stars—thousands and thousands of them, past all reckoning, and all whirling and turning and speeding on their intricate ways. Could this vast mechanism maneuver itself? Rocks and air and fire and water had no intelligence of their own. Surely, back of it all, a stupendous Mind guided the plan of the universe. Blind chance could not evolve such perfect order.

"There's something," Burl murmured. "A guide, a God, a spirit, something!"

There was comfort in the thought of such a power, and yet its very vastness could be awful at the same time. Thus old thoughts revolved as he watched the first thin sliver of gold lift above the edge of the world. An arc of warmth spread from the sun fire, higher and higher, till half the sky lived again. There was a feeling of completion about watching until the whole round ball was safely above the earth rim.

He remembered reading or hearing somebody talk about sun worshipers. He wondered about them, where they lived, what they believed, just how they felt about the sun. Perhaps he himself was a kind of sun worshiper without knowing it. No doubt he would like these people and understand their ways. He should have taken the time to learn about them. Yes, he should have taken the time for many things. But now he was at the end of time.

Or perhaps not. Perhaps he was really just at the beginning of time. That was the question of greatest moment. The end or the beginning? Who could tell him? Really no one. He had decided that before. Someone could tell him how many millions of miles the earth moved away from the sun. They could tell him that a year from today, at half-past ten, there would be an eclipse of the sun.

Yes, they could tell him these things, but who could tell him about himself a year from today? Could he still move about over his fields and feel the warmth of the sun? In that mysterious world of the spirit there was much to be discovered.

He remembered the Bible he had brought with him. It was looked upon as a guide, a way-shower, at such a time. He had been brought up to think of the Bible like that. All the years of his life he had been a churchman, when a church was available. Why?

There was no point in not being honest with himself now. Old Burl Zither, who no longer left his farm, could not now be an impressive figure in the countryside. Yes, perhaps he had cared a good deal about making an impressive name for himself. He wanted to be thought of as a devout churchman, one highly prospered of the Lord. But he had really credited his own hard work and good judgment as the sources of his prosperity.

Belonging to a church was a part of respectability—an important part. Tramps, drinkers, seasonal hired men; they did not care about churches. But solid citizens increased their respectability by alliance with a church. All his life he had been busy building himself into greater and greater respectability. He had been sensitive about it. When Tom or Fred did something to reflect on the Zither name, he had been hurt. Not so much because of Tom or Fred, but only that they had touched his respectability.

He remembered the countless times when he had mentally contrasted himself with old Butch Hodgins. Each had come to the country in the early days. Their chances had been equal. Yet Butch had nothing but the name of a ne'er-do-well. He

picked up odd jobs and loafed about the streets. Burl could see him now, as he had seen him countless times, sitting on a bench in the sun, whittling. There were usually children around him, begging for the things he whittled or urging him to mend their treasures.

It was queer about that, how the children hung around him, as if they did not know he amounted to nothing. He must have spent half his life fooling around with the useless knickknacks children played with. Butch was no good, even to himself, and now he was an old man. He was a kind of blot on the general industry of the district. His passing would cause no ripple of change in any business. No one would care much, except a few children. They would miss him. Yes, they would miss him a lot, tremendously!

The appalling knowledge came to him like a blow, sudden and inescapable. Old Butch, the town loafer, would leave a far greater loneliness at his passing than he, Burl Zither, the man of property, the church pillar, the respectable citizen. He bowed himself as if the knowledge crushed a whole lifetime of effort. He turned his face into the sod and wept.

When he came to himself the sun rode high. It gazed upon him, its old warmth and friendliness undimmed. Often, as before, he murmured the words: "I will lift up mine eyes—I will lift up mine eyes unto the sun." The preachers might not approve this pagan version. He did not know hills; they meant little to a man of the plains. But he knew the sun; an old devotion existed between them. The years brought change; friends drifted; families scattered, but the sun smiled on, familiar, immutable.

He was lifted in spirit but tired in body. He turned his steps homeward for breakfast or dinner or whatever Osa might have for him at the odd hours he came to the house.

"Come whenever, Mr. Zither," she had told him. "I'll watch for you."

"Anything you have ready, Osa. Never bother about me."

That was the understanding they made between them. He

could wander the fields then without thought of the passing hours.

In the late afternoon he went out to Emma's poplars. Young kingbirds, almost fully grown, dashed from sheds to trees and back again, calling to each other in a riot of voices. Osa's kitten families chased each other in and out of the spaces under the tool shed. In the feed yard young roosters, already feeling their manhood, stood up to each other in gawky, defiant challenge.

Now, because he had all day to think about it, the playing of young things became an unfailing reminder of his own serious youth. Play seemed a natural need of young everywhere, the play that he had missed in his faraway time. A curious combination had crowded out this playtime: his great ambition to succeed and his belief that strictness and religion were the same.

He carried the Bible with him to the trees. Something might be found about a glad type of religion, although he had little hope of anything really definite. He fixed himself in the dry grass on the sunny side of the grove. He opened the book at random, with a vague expectation that he might be guided to a revealing passage.

The Bible reminded him of the time when he had insisted on the gathering of the family for a daily reading. He remembered the casual opening of the pages, hoping to find a short chapter without deliberately hunting for one. Even as he read the words his mind had been busy with the work waiting to be done in the fields.

He read now, trying to concentrate, but often wandering to old memories. Then he came to a verse about someone who "played" and he went over the verse again:

"And David and all Israel played before God with all their might, and with singing and with harps."

Here was something definite and wholehearted. They did it with all their might. It was done as part of a religious service. Burl put a heavy mark in the margin so that he might find the place again.

He read on and on with no recollection of having read before.

No doubt he had gone over it all, probably numbers of times, pronouncing the words but finding no meaning in them.

It was amazing. He made mark after mark in the margin as he read:

Sing unto the Lord, all the earth.

Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice.

Let the sea roar and the fulness thereof; let the fields rejoice, and all that is therein.

Then shall the trees of the wood sing out at the presence of the Lord.

He made two marks for this one. It was very special. Even the trees—his precious trees—were exhorted to play after their own peculiar style. The earth and the sea and the fields were singled out for special mention. The great stalwarts of ancient time must have been men of the country. They knew how the trees of the wood sing out. Only one who really understood trees could talk about them like that.

They did sing out. Not exactly the wind in the branches or the clapping of leaves, but a deeper tone. An exhalation that came only by waiting and listening. Even then it was more felt than heard, a rising and falling of harmony that escaped the ear but played upon the spirit.

Burl closed the book. The sun had dropped and the poplar shadows lengthened to the far side of the field. This was the one time of the day that depressed him. He did not mind the darkness, after it came, but the gathering shadows weighed upon him. One line of a poem came to him, a poem that Fred had gone about repeating aloud as he tried to memorize it for school: "The long day wanes."

Over and over through the years he had thought of that line as he watched a thousand sunsets. He wondered what came before and what the next line said, but he did not know how to find the poem.

"The long day wanes." He used to think of it as describing

the close of a summer day. Now it seemed to mean more than just a day. It was life itself. His own life. His long day was rapidly waning into the shadows. Yes, he had had sunshine more than most, in some ways. But the coming of night was inevitable.

"The long day wanes." He repeated it again and again as twilight gathered under the poplars.

The days were still bright, and the air held a new crispness after sunset. At the rustling of a breeze leaves floated down from the big maples and splotched the road with color. Life paused for a season; the quick growth of summer was ended.

It was not easy, in fact it was impossible, to overcome the habits of a lifetime. There was no sense in being out so early, as Osa told him, but Burl did it anyway. He liked to hear the morning whistles of threshing engines. Far away, a mere echo, then near at hand, in the middle distance, the whistles answered each other across the vastness of the plains. Smoke plumes arose in the crisp, still air.

"They're threshing on Sam's old place." Burl noticed the smoke. "They'll be at Heck's next week. Guess they finished with Levi last night—smoke's over at Herman's now."

He always thought of the farms by the names of the old owners. It was not easy to remember new people, farmers who had moved in a mere ten or twenty years ago.

"Andrew can do with a good yield this year; needs it more than Ceph." When he talked of departed owners people looked at him curiously. The old-timers were not really there, of course, but folks should know he meant the farms and not the owners. Jim and Osa knew. They remembered who had lived on the various farms so that he could talk and they understood him.

From daylight until darkness, and even later, the machines hummed. Straw billowed in a steady stream, like a volcano in eruption, building for itself a great yellow cone. In the afternoon a halo of chaff hung above the straw mountain. In the dusk lanterns winked, but the tireless machine hummed on and

on, as if unaware that darkness had fallen upon the land. Burl could never explain to another how he felt about harvest. Not his own harvest exactly, or that of his neighbors, but the whole vast prairie harvest. Harvest was not just another round of work to be finished with speed; it was something of a rite, the culmination of an age-old understanding.

At the time of harvest there was no feeling of being cut off from the great world of men and cities. Here was a world center, the source from which flowed millions upon millions of bushels to peoples dwelling on the farthest rim of the world.

Burl liked to stand at the end of the spout through which wheat poured from the machine. He liked to let the stream run through his fingers as it flowed into the wagon box. Perhaps the very grains that he touched might sustain the life of a king or queen, a sailor, a miner, a black, or an Eskimo. Paris, London, the Arctic, Singapore, palm trees, skyscrapers; there were few corners wheat did not reach. Why should anyone feel isolation, loneliness, on the wheat plains? Other places were the outposts, but never the kingdom of wheat.

At such periods of exaltation he felt that his work had been chosen aright, that his years were not in vain. He wondered about Sam and Heck, Herman and Levi, and the others. Were they thinking only about bushels and acres and prices, or did they feel themselves part of a larger scheme of things, necessary cogs in some vast cosmic order? He had never quite dared talk to anyone about this, not even to Sam who was nearest to him in understanding. Perhaps he was peculiar. He had always hesitated to shake his reputation for sound judgment. And now the old-time farmers who might have understood were all gone. Wherever they were, perhaps they understood, even better than when they wandered about their fields in the flesh. It was a thought to ponder over.

II

THROUGH THE SHORTENING AUTUMN DAYS he read through the familiar books of the old Bible. He thought they were familiar, but now they gave out a new spirit he had entirely missed before. Goodness was not cold and stern, but everywhere there were rejoicings, exhortations to sing, laugh, play, shout. It was amazing that the Bible could be like that. He had marked the verses of peculiar appeal:

They joy before thee according to the joy in harvest.

Therefore with joy shall ye draw water out of the wells of salvation.

Yea, the fir trees rejoice at thee.

He turned page after page, reading slowly where he had made double marks to show a reference to farming:

Both he that soweth and he that reapeth may rejoice together.

The pastures are clothed with flocks: the valleys also are covered with corn; they shout for joy, they also sing.

Rejoice in the Lord, ye righteous; and give thanks at the remembrance of his holiness. Let the field be joyful, and all that is therein; then shall all the trees of the wood rejoice.

The Lord reigneth, let the earth rejoice.

There seemed to be an endless number of such passages. He read and pondered and read again. He put his fingers between the pages and looked out over the autumn stubble. The flocks and trees and fields and harvests—they were all urged to live in a state of joy. Not mildly, but mightily; singing and dancing and clapping and shouting to let it be known that they were alive and glad of it.

Yes, it was strange how he had missed the significance of all these hundreds and hundreds of verses. He remembered again the solemn Sabbath hush of his father's household and how he had imposed the same grim spirit upon his own family. He could see again Tom and Fred, going about almost on tiptoe, restless and miserable, fearing they might forget and let out a shout, glad when the long day was over.

So it had been all wrong! There had been none of the singing and rejoicing, the dancing and playing that pervaded the fields and the woods and the harvests of Holy Writ. How had he missed it all? The natural thing. The very thing that, almost without doubt, would have kept his sons around him. Tom and Fred on their own places, near at hand. His sons and grandsons. No loneliness of old age, but families gathering about him. Young voices to shout across the fields, to sing in the trees, to rejoice everywhere because the Lord reigneth.

Burl used a cane now, a piece of curiously bent ash fashioned for himself when he had fallen from a load of hay and turned his ankle. He moved along the roads and lanes like one infinitely weary, but driven on by an urge of the spirit. The sun became weary too, its arc dropping farther and farther down the sky.

Geese sailed overhead. Not the vast army of a half century ago, but a few short ranks, little wedges that drifted sadly out of the gray North and faded into the mist. Somehow they seemed to know that the great race of geese was over, that never again would their clamorous millions settle over the stubble fields. Burl lifted his cane in a swift salute of farewell. They were going the way of all old-timers and he was going along with them. Good-by, gray geese. Good-by, white geese.

Early twilight gathered beneath the trees. Already Osa's light winked from the kitchen window, and a chill came up from the Big Slough in the pasture. Burl turned from the maple leaves falling through a drift of mist.

"The long day wanes." There was something wistful, almost yearning, about the line. Again he murmured: "The long day wanes."

As he passed the henhouse he heard a confusion of sound. He looked in. The young broods were finding their shelter from the first nip of cold. On the higher roost the old hens sat in quiet, accustomed rows. On the perches below, the little pullets and young roosters crowded and complained and pushed each other to the ground. High above all the patriarch rooster sat, aloof and scornful of the tumult below. He knew his place and no one argued with him.

In the kitchen Osa had pork ribs waiting, hot and sputtering in their own gravy. Every day she had something new. Ham, headcheese, steak, tongue, bacon, chicken, chops—everything without stint.

It was good to have plenty, Burl thought. It carried with it a sense of security and permanence. A knowledge that the earth was good. But the early days had been good too. There was something about sharing even a little that brought neighbors closer, something that the abundance of later years did not quite give.

There had been no need of deciding, then, what they would eat. They ate what they had. There were no alternatives. In their hauling of wood from the river flats, they had also hunted. Sam and Heck had been with him then. They gunned for rabbits and prairie chickens. If the hunting was poor, they tricked each other into believing they had something. They hid a rabbit or a chicken in each other's loads of wood. No one felt comfortable if he believed the others might lack.

He remembered the zero day after a long blizzard, when there seemed to be nothing alive anywhere. Each had taken his load home soberly. But as Burl unloaded he found a rabbit hidden in the wood. Sam had done it. It was a poor, thin thing. But he had taken it over to Sam's. By lantern light they sat down at the table together. Yes, there was something about those days that drew men into an understanding.

As he sat now in the comfort of Osa's abundance he remembered how he and Emma had gone to Heck Phinney's for the first time. At least it was the first time for Emma. Heck had

come along one cold afternoon. He said to Emma, in his rough embarrassed way: "We had an old hen die at our place." Then he went on.

When Burl came home he saw Heck's track in the snow.

"What was Heck after?"

"He was kind of queer," Emma explained, puzzled. "He just wanted to tell me about a hen."

"What kind of a hen?"

"It died."

"What?"

"He just said it died."

"He did! Why, that's just his way of asking us over. He always says that. He wants us to come for a real feed."

"But, Burl, the hen died!"

"It died under Heck's ax. That's the way he talks. He's the first one of us to keep hens."

And so they had gone to see Heck and his new wife, Sarah. How proud Heck was of the big brown hen on its steaming platter!

"Beats all how things die around here!" Heck laughed. "Think there's a pig 'bout due to kick off next week!"

Emma had tried not to look shocked, and Sarah explained: "Don't mind him, Mrs. Zither. He means it's time to kill a pig, and we'll send you over some."

They had been like that always. Forty years—maybe it was nearer fifty—they had been sending each other things across the fields. Then Heck's deep chuckle was heard no more and he was taken to rest with the other sleepers on the hill. Sarah missed him. She missed his big laugh all over the place. She seemed to fade away for no reason the doctor could tell. In a little while she was gone too, and strangers plowed the old fields.

I2

ALTHOUGH THE NIGHTS WERE SHARP, there was still warmth in the midday sun. Burl sat on a bank of maple leaves, his back against a tree trunk. Little gusts of wind arose in the fields and sent the leaves drifting across the road. There was significance in these skirls of dead leaves. The falling of the leaves had always brought upon him a haunting melancholy. Now their falling carried a double meaning.

He tried to fix his mind on the permanence of the trees. He put his hands on the rough trunk. Under its bark the life sap would flow on and on through unnumbered seasons.

As his hand caressed the tree he heard a sudden shuffling of the leaves. Then a man's voice behind him:

"You like trees? I shouldn't ask. I can see it without asking." He looked with admiration down the long line of trunks. "You planted them, of course?"

"Yes, I planted them." He felt resentful at first that a stranger had noticed him touching the tree. But the other's interest was so real, the feeling died away.

"You have a fine forest here." The man gazed at the far cottonwoods, the pasture plantation, the poplars. "Trees are a great monument. The finest. Marble monuments cost money. The richest man has the tallest column. It means nothing. Trees show character. The character of the one who cared for them." The man talked on, more as if he thought aloud than anything else. "A man leaves children, grandchildren. They may be good or bad, a comfort or a worry. You can rely on trees. They behave. They never wander off the old place." The man touched the nearest tree as if he were putting his hand on the head of a faithful dog.

No one had spoken to him like that before. Burl heard another put into words the old thoughts that he had revolved so long unspoken. He was always aloof with strangers, but he warmed toward the man who cared for trees.

"Maybe you like to see the woods on the other quarter?"

"I would. I'd like to see all you'd care to show me." The man spoke as if a great favor had been offered.

They sat in the stranger's car and crept along to the big cottonwoods on the west line. He asked the ages of the trees and how they had been cared for in the early days.

They halted on the sunny side of the pasture elms. The man explained himself:

"My name is Silverson—Alva Silverson. I teach astronomy back East. I'm on my way to the Pacific coast. There's an eclipse to peer at in a few weeks. Thought I'd drive across country; take my time and look at things. When I was about to pass through your town I noticed these trees. Queer to see a forest like this on the bare plains. So I thought I'd come out and see what made them spring up in this particular spot. Just an old professor's curiosity, you know."

"But you've thought about trees," Burl said. "You thought about them a lot before you saw these."

"A man doesn't reach my age—our age—without thinking of a number of things. Trees and life, past and future. Stars and eternity. Plenty of problems for us, my friend."

"I have the problems," Burl said slowly, "but I'm not so good on the thinking."

"We all reach tough spots in our thinking." Professor Silverson regarded the tree ranks meditatively. "Knowing everything easily might not be good for us."

"Maybe not," Burl agreed.

The two sat in silence for a time. A shower of leaves dropped, pattering on the car roof.

"It's autumn," the professor mused. "Almost winter."

He said it in such a way that Burl knew he was not thinking

much about the seasons. There were other kinds of autumns. "Yes, it's autumn," Burl repeated wistfully.

"Do you mind very much?" The professor turned suddenly.

"No—not very much," Burl said slowly. "Not if I knew spring would come along."

"Isn't that what we'd all like to know?" After a moment he went on. "It's the dread of extinction that worries us. It's a universal fear."

It was strange to be sitting in a warm car and talking like this to a complete stranger. There was comfort in the knowledge that another human being had the same problems, the same thoughts, really. Only he was able to talk about such things, find words for the baffling emotions, the vague surmises. After the lonely months of going into the autumn alone there came a peculiar sense of security in companionship, even without many words.

Here was another white-haired traveler, not so old perhaps, not quite so far along the road, but a pilgrim on the same great highway.

"You're a religious man, I take it?" The stranger spoke after the long silence.

"Yes," Burl said. Then he hesitated. "No, I'm not sure. I used to think so, but I guess I'm not."

"It was a foolish question. No meaning to it," Silverson apologized. "We scientific men should be more definite."

"I know what you meant, in a way," Burl assured him.

"We're old enough to be frank with each other. We've each had a long life, and now we're wondering about another life. We'd like to have another and we'd like to keep our identities. Isn't that about everything?"

"I guess it is—if we could know that."

"The religious man believes because he has faith; the man of science believes because he knows."

"Does he know, this man of science?" Burl was eager, yet almost fearful, to hear the answer.

"Yes, for myself, I'm quite sure of it." There was assurance

in the voice, assurance even more convincing than the words.

"I'm glad to hear you say that," Burl said, "but—"

"But my assertion doesn't mean anything. No assertion means anything. We need proof."

"It would help," Burl agreed meekly.

"It's everything," the man smiled. "And it's not easy to explain. At least not in a few words. But if you think it would help you, sort of help you over the top, as a soldier might say, I'll try, if you'd like me to."

"I'd like it—more than anything."

"I thought you would when I saw how you looked at your fine trees. When I was a young man I read a good deal of poetry. I fastened on everything hopeful the poets said. Little bits like 'If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?' I was a great Browning reader. I memorized many of his fine lines. 'We fall to rise, are baffled to fight better, sleep to wake.' And then, farther on: 'Fight on, fare ever, there as here!' Things like that are splendid. They satisfied me for a time. But, after all, they are only assertions or perhaps just hopes beautifully expressed.

"In my work we must have exactness, figures, formulas, or we make little progress. In our study of the universe we have come upon distances so vast that the use of ordinary figures becomes almost without meaning. There is a vastness which we cannot discover or make comprehensible by means of measurements which the average mind understands. And yet it is there. When old methods fail, there must be a new one somewhere. We have it. For me, it has become the proof of immortality. If I could only make it as clear for you as I have it in my own mind."

The man of science paused, as if he sought a way of overcoming the word barrier.

"All this means nothing yet, I know."

"I haven't caught very much," Burl admitted.

"Let's start this way. In all your farm experience you measure things three ways. Your bags and bins and lumber and barns are so long and so wide and so thick. You never had a fourth measurement for anything, did you?"

"I never thought of it, but I guess that's right," Burl agreed, puzzled. "If a thing is so long, so wide, and so thick, there couldn't be anything else."

"But there is another," the professor smiled. "Great thinkers felt there should be another, but they could not quite get it. Ah, but we have it now. It is TIME! Time is the other measurement. Time and space are the same. Don't try to think about it now. It's too hard at first. Just remember what I've said. Let it mellow in your mind, after I've gone."

"I'll try to remember," Burl promised. "Time is the same as space," he repeated.

"You have a radio, of course?"

"Yes," Burl said. "There's one in the house, but I don't use it much."

"If someone had told you, when you were a young man, that sounds could be picked out of the air, someone's voice in London, Africa—anywhere—you would hardly have listened to such seemingly foolish talk. We could go in your house now and possibly listen to some children singing in Australia, a general in Europe, talking to his soldiers, bells ringing in Jerusalem; anything, anywhere. Somehow familiarity has dimmed the wonder of it. Even the pictures of the people talking are caught from the air. In a short time now, while we are listening to people from the ends of the earth, we shall, at the same moment, be seeing them. Television is accomplished.

"In a marvelous, orderly way, waves of light and ether vibrate and carry all sound and movement on and on out to inconceivable distance. An event on our earth might reach a planet man a week after it happened. A still more distant planet man a year later, and so without limit. Our past is his future. If we reverse the event, his past now becomes our future. What our imaginary distant man is going to see in his future has already happened. In other words, to put this confusing thought in its simplest way, there is no past or future, there is only one incredible NOW!

"Sometime, and it is not as difficult as the things we have al-

ready accomplished, we are going to see the events of what we now call the future and those that we believe, in our limited way, have taken place in the so-called past. There is no past or future, because time is only space. Does this mean something to you, my friend?"

"It's wonderful!" Burl gasped. "It's almost too wonderful. It's really kind of awful!"

"Exactly what it is!" Professor Silverson agreed. "But nothing to alarm us. It will be, it is now, the supreme discovery of mankind. It is not likely that all these possibilities will be realized in your lifetime or mine. But we know the great principle. Only the details remain to be worked out."

They sat for a time in silence. It was not a subject about which men chatted easily.

"Don't try to hurry your understanding," Professor Silverson cautioned. "The best plan is to let the thing grow, unfold, and ripen in its own good way. Suppose the possibilities were practical at this moment, what would be your wish?"

"I—I'd like to see—someone who hasn't been here for a long time." Burl whispered the daring thought.

"Wouldn't we all! But remember, there is really no past or future. Your friend has been here always, is here now; only in the density of our understanding we have not been able to see those who are with us—always."

"She's with me? Always!" He breathed the words as if fearful of disturbing a presence.

The men sat watching the long shadows of the cottonwoods touch the far edge of the field. Then the stranger said gently:

"I must go now, my friend. I hope our talk will smooth the way a bit. Do not be troubled if all is not clear. Let us cheer ourselves by remembering the result, even if we do not understand the means of reaching it."

"Yes, I'll try," Burl promised. "I'll never forget this."

"And remember, too, that it has been already accomplished. We know of those who, because of a mental ability which we do not understand, have been able to step into some scene long

past according to our usual time recording. They have described details of scenery, the exact appearance, dress, and action of people they could ordinarily have known nothing about. Careful search of historical records proved their experience true in every detail. By some strange ability they existed briefly in the fourth dimension, where there is neither past nor future. Someday we shall do this, not by accident, but whenever we wish. We will no longer be grieved by the departure of loved ones. They are living in time just as we knew them when they lived in space. For time and space are one. Here we have the answer to man's age-old desire for immortality. It has always been true, but we couldn't see it."

Burl stepped from the car like a man who feels his way in sleep. He turned to say good-by.

"This is the—well, it just changes everything," he murmured brokenly.

"If my little knowledge has helped, I am happy. The young will hear of this everywhere. But we need to know it now. We're old men as physical age is counted. As the poet said: 'All in a twilight, you and I alike.' We've been in a twilight, my friend; let us now live in the light."

The men clasped hands in a wordless understanding. Then the stranger was gone and Burl moved homeward in the cold dusk.

I3

WITH THE SHORTENING DAYS a grim change spread over the plains. Even at noonday the sun no longer gave its mellow light. A hard slate gray overcast the sky and the voices of the little birds were stilled. The tired earth prepared for a long sleep.

The cattle came into the barns every night. The cat hurried on her short journey between barn and house and would not be lured from the warm spot between the stove and the woodbox. It was in this narrow strip, Burl remembered, that Emma had installed a cat the first year they had lived in the Big House. Generations of cats had dreamed away the winters in the same corner.

There was little pleasure now in moving across the hard fields. No hot sun beat down with grateful warmth; indeed there was hardly a sun at all. The days seemed little more than twilight, and early darkness shut down upon a gloomy earth.

Bundled up in a greatcoat was not the way to live. It was a burden, a heavy burden to carry along the lanes and roads. It gave him a shut-in feeling, as if he could not rightly see and feel the things about him. But Osa insisted. She tried to keep him inside altogether. There was really not much point in going out anyway, except that it broke the long monotony of sitting by the window.

The old sun was gone and it was time for all old things to go. But there was really no going at all; that's what the stranger had told him. All day and most of the night he pondered on the talk by the roadside. It was not easy to understand. Great knowledge like that was not easy to come by, or people would have known about it a long time ago.

He could not understand every step the way the stranger explained it. But the final meaning of it all was what really counted. A man without much learning could easily become tangled in the strange mingling of time and space. They were the same; that was easy to remember. Space did not pass away, it was here always. So time could not pass either. The long years could not take departed ones farther and farther away, as he had once thought. They lived in space, in the space where they had always lived.

Perhaps he had missed out parts of what the stranger had told him. It was not easy to remember unfamiliar words. But there was something that could not be forgotten. Emma was here!

She was here in the old familiar places. She was here just as he had seen her a thousand times.

Then his experience in the shadows of the poplar trees had not been imagined. Emma had been there! She had always been there, walking about and no doubt wondering why he did not see her. Tom was here and Fred, playing by the Big Slough, running through the pasture. Sam was on his old place and Heck and Levi and Herman, the whole great company!

It was overwhelming. He trembled as the boldness of the thing grew upon him. He would be with them, too, not carried on and on by endless measurements of time. A chance to play, a chance to sing, to be glad, to be joyful in all the ways he had foolishly missed. All night the thought stayed with him. He did not hear the endless going and coming of the winds across the fields. He did not notice the dirges as the winds wailed about the windows.

Even at noon next day dark clouds trailed low overhead. So they would drift all day, lower and darker, as the hand of winter came down over the plains.

In the afternoon Burl was seized with a sudden desire to see once more his one oak tree. He would come home by way of the Big Slough. The cattails and rushes were stiff and dry but they were still free of snow. They would be a reminder of Tom and Fred, of the years long ago when the boys waded, shouting and calling, along the marshy banks. Why, not long ago at all! The stranger had said there was no long ago. It was hard to change the old way of thinking about such things. Perhaps even now— Still it was rather more than one could expect. Not for a while yet, the stranger said. But it had been done. There were those who had walked into that mysterious mingling of time and space.

With a subdued excitement he began to put on his boots. It took a long time to struggle into the thick stiffness of the new overcoat Osa had brought from town. Then Osa herself appeared.

"Oh, Mr. Zither! You're not surely going into the cold even?"

"Only a little while, Osa."

"It's a cold wind and snowing almost, soon," Osa urged.

"Just once. Only this one time before snow comes." He feared that she might call Jim and they would gently but firmly keep him in the warm kitchen. "I got to go, Osa. Just around by the Big Slough. Tom and Fred might be— Well, anyway, I won't stay long."

It was foolish to tell Osa about the boys, but it had slipped out in his excitement. She looked at him in a queer way as if she thought he might not be just right in his head.

"Don't stay long now," Osa begged. She helped him down the steps. "There'll be hot coffee soon, waiting." She turned up the collar around his ears.

He turned for a moment in the path. "Maybe playtime is soon, too." It was strange how telling somebody made him feel better, even if Osa did think he was queer.

He moved slowly, very slowly, out against the wind. The melancholy land stretched, gray and weary, beneath a somber sky. The width of the pasture seemed endless, but going home the wind would be in his back.

At last the plantations of ash and elms were past, their stiff, leafless branches black against the gray clouds. There, in the midst of the little clearing, stood the solitary oak.

Burl touched the rough trunk wistfully. A farewell. The tree was stout now, established and independent. It could go on without care, indefinitely, expanding through the slow years. He sat down to rest on the drift of leaves beneath the oak. He felt a hard spot under his hand. Curiously he lifted the round thing and looked. Then in a moment he knew. An acorn! The first of his one oak tree!

After the years of expectancy the tree had not disappointed him. From now on it would yield every season. Young oaks pushing through the sheltering leaves, a wider and wider circle, a brotherhood of oaks, stalwart, protecting, maturing with a slow wisdom. The Zither oaks! For a time he thought about this.

Then he felt himself shivering even through the thick coat. It was hard to tell whether the dim light was real twilight or only the dusk of a dark day. His knees were stiff and cramped. With all his strength he lifted himself, clinging to the tree until he stood again. When night came Osa might worry. He began the journey home.

Beside the Big Slough he paused. He had planned to rest here, but the darkness gathered so fast it was hardly worth sitting down with all the trouble of getting up again. The wind made lonely sounds through the dead rushes, an endless whispering, like the murmurings of those who are half asleep.

He felt the acorn in his pocket. He meant to bury it in the leaves under the oak. But with all the work of getting started, he had forgotten and dropped it in his pocket. The acorn would grow just as well in the leaves of Emma's poplars. He began a slow progress back of the willow hedge behind the Little House. Osa must not see him until the planting was done.

Suddenly there were white spots on his coat sleeves. He looked up. Already the first snow of the long winter drifted through the dusk.

He moved across the floor of leaves beneath the poplars. Here was the spot where he had waited as he felt Emma come to him in the dark of summer nights. Emma who lived endlessly in space, who walked beneath the trees she had helped to plant. In summer the leaves whispered of her presence; in winter the great wind voices gathered, swelling through the lifted arms of the same bare trees.

He sat down for a moment to think of these things. Out of the sweep of the wind he felt warm and surprisingly comfortable. Why not wait a little while? Was there not a possibility? Time made no difference, the stranger said. Nor would the seasons count for anything. Whatever happened just before a summer dawn could happen now. He sprawled more comfortably in the leaves and waited.

He thought of her as he had seen her the first time. A kind of bluish dress like the blue of prairie skies. He saw her breath-

less and racing across the burned prairie sod. In the sod barn, near the oxen, she looked with infinite pride on the newborn Tom. Emma waving to him at noontime from the Little House. How frightened she had been of the harmless Indians! Emma in the Big House, regretful that she must leave him in the midst of harvest. His thoughts trailed off into the mist of years.

Slowly he felt the presence grow upon him. From the far end of the tree aisle came the faint stirring that was neither wind nor leaves. As always before, the advancement was slow, almost timid, as if not quite sure of a welcome. He waited, tense and eager. He made no sound or movement of disturbance.

This would be the time! No sudden retreat, no dying away as before. He saw her! Faint, like a twilight visitor, waiting to be known and welcomed. He could scarcely breathe for excitement. He feared to move and feared not to move. She came on closer and clearer through the trees.

In a sudden access of joy he put out his arms. He had not meant to do this, but he could no longer restrain himself.

"Emma! You've come! You've come to play!"

She smiled and seemed about to speak.

Then there were other voices in the trees, Jim and Osa and several strangers. They carried lanterns and he knew they were hunting for him. Jim called out and they gathered around him. No one seemed to notice Emma, they were all so anxious about him.

"I couldn't do anything," Osa said. "He made me let him go out, always."

"You could do nothing, even," Jim told her. "You shouldn't cry so."

They gathered round him, Jim and Osa and two hired men. Osa kept on explaining:

"I keep watch but he don't come back on the front way. I was so afraid! He said like he was gone to see Tom and Fred."

"That was his sons," Jim told the others. "Long time ago."

"Oh, Jim!" Osa sobbed. "Think how it was! Out in the cold and dark. All alone!"

Jim put his arms around her. "Now, now, Osa! I know him like nobody else. I think he want it that way."

They kneeled around him. Jim noticed the half-opened hand still holding something. He held it up in the lantern light.

"Why, it's a acorn!" one of the men explained in wonder.

"I'll put it here." Jim scraped a hole with his heel. He dropped the acorn and covered the hole. "We carry him home now," Jim said.

They gathered around. Osa remembered:

"He said, 'Maybe playtime is soon.' It was last words he said." Her tears flowed again.

"He was right," Jim said brokenly.

The men all stooped and lifted him out of the leaves. They began to carry him carefully home to the Big House. Osa walked ahead with the lantern.

It was queer how they marched along through the trees, thinking he was with them. Yes, it was queer how they had not even noticed Emma. They had taken no account of Sam or Heck, or of Levi and Joe and Herman. They had been too busy with their grief to notice any of the grand company. Nor did they see Tom or Fred who had come from far, far away on the other side of the sea.

[illegible]

GINC 11-72

RETURN

ARC Aug 27 12

AUG 16 1961

22

1971	10	RETURN
------	----	--------

PS 8509 VZ AB 1944
EVANS ALLEN ROY B 1885
ALL IN A TWILIGHT/

M1 40814277 HSS



"000032986416"

